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RANCH ROMANCES

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A THRILLING PUBLICATION
FIRST APRIL NUMBER

FEATURING

GUNS OF CIBOLA
by Ray G. Ellis

CRISIS AT CARBINE CANYON
by J. L. Bouma

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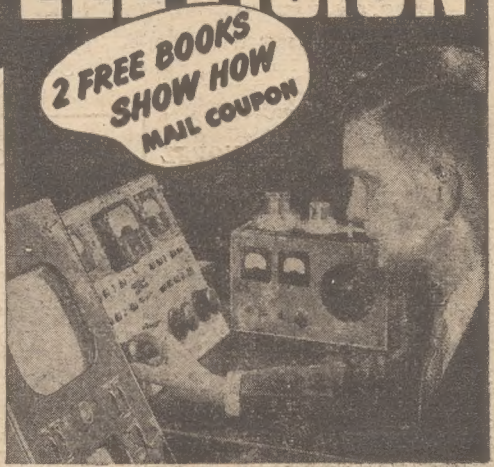

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32nd Year
OF PUBLICATION

FIRST APRIL NUMBER
March 23, 1956
Volume 197, No. 2

RANCH ROMANCES

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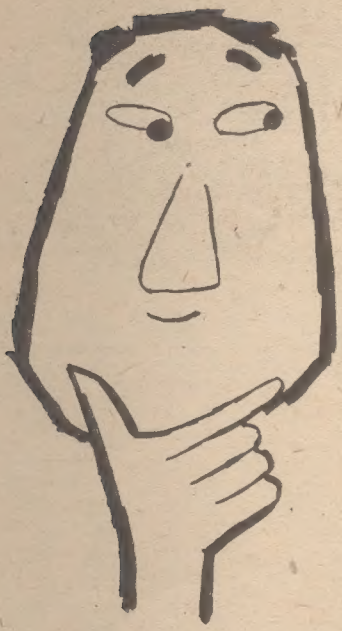
HELEN TONO
Editor

RANCH ROMANCES issued bi-weekly by Literary Enterprises, Inc., 1125 E. Vaile Ave., Kokomo, Ind. N. L. Pines, President. Entered as Second Class matter at the Post Office at Kokomo, Ind., under Act of March 3, 1879. Single copies, 25c; Yearly subscription, $5.00; add 80c for Canadian, $1.50 for foreign and Pan-American subscriptions. Editorial and Executive Offices, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y. Title registered as Trade Mark in U. S. Patent Office. Copyright 1956 by Literary Enterprises, Inc. Printed in the U.S.A. The names of all persons in fiction stories in this magazine have no reference to any person living or dead. Ranch Romances does not assume responsibility for safe return of unsolicited manuscripts.



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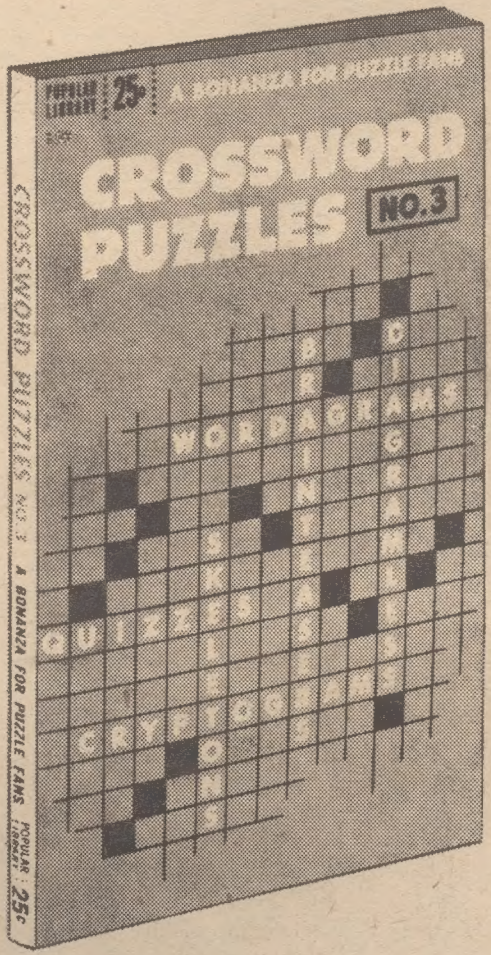

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Men! Men!! Men!!!

Dear Editor:

A bunch of us guys have nothing to do but to wait for mail that doesn't come in. We wonder if some of your readers would write to some Air Force guys that are stranded in the middle of the desert. It's eighty miles to civilization, girls!

		Age	Ht.	Eyes	Hair
a/2c	Jack Fallon	22	6′	blue	black
a/3c	Maurice Horsely	21	6′ 1″	blue	blond
a/3c	Ken Crocher	18	5′ 9″	brown	black
a/3c	Carlson	18	5′10″	brown	brown
a/3c	Bob Blaggs	19	6′ 1″	hazel	brown
a/3c	George McCabe	20	5′ 9″	blue	blond
a/2c	Buz Valiance	22	5′ 9″	blue	lt. brown
a/2c	Robert Allen	18	6′	brown	brown

750 AC and W Squadron
Boron, California

Desperate

Dear Editor:

If you don't print my plea soon, I won't have any stamps left to write letters, as I'm using them up writing to you. I'm 21 years old, 5′6½″ tall, and have brown hair and eyes. I have many hobbies. Would like to hear from people around my own age. Please fill a very, very empty mail box.

GRACE BAKER

Box 342
Alcester, South Dakota

Guy With a Line

Dear Editor:

I believe this is the first time that a commercial fisherman has written to you. I am 34 years old, 5′7″ tall and weigh 187 lbs. I like all sports, and I hunt with a bow and arrow. Would like to write to anyone who has a yearning to hear some good adventure stories.

TONY A. STANOVICH

YMCA Building
Bellingham, Washington

Can't Make Up Her Mind

Dear Editor:

I would like very much to become an artist but would also like to join the Women's Air Force when I get out of school. I am 5′3″ tall and have brown hair and blue eyes. My age is 16, my hobbies include letter writing, drawing, and horseback riding.

SHARON DICKEN

P.O. Box 386
Dysart, Iowa

Misplaced Person

Dear Editor:

What are the chances of a misplaced Coloradoan getting his name in "Our Air Mail?" I am in the air force and would like more mail. I am 22 years old, 6′1″ tall, weigh 160 lbs., and have brown hair and green eyes. I like all outdoor sports. I promise to answer each and every letter.

A/1c HAROLD D. WALKER

AF 17347490 Box 221
1501st Base Flight Sqdn.
Travis A.F.B., California

EDITOR'S NOTE: For 31 years Our Air Mail has been linking the readers of Ranch Romances. You may write directly to anyone whose letter is published, if you uphold the wholesome spirit of Ranch Romances.

Our Air Mail is intended for those who really want correspondents. Be sure to sign your own name. Address letters for publication to Our Air Mail, Ranch Romances, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y.

Canadian Army Man

Dear Editor:

I'm in the Canadian Army and am very lonesome. My age is 21 and I'm 6′2″ tall, weigh 185 lbs., and have blond hair and gray-blue eyes. I like horses, swimming, boxing and dancing. I promise to answer every letter.

DIETER MANFRED HAMANN

SL 162332 PTE PPCLI Depot
Roatti, Sauael
Currie, Barracks
Calgary, Alberta, Canada

Third Time

Dear Editor:

This is my third attempt to get into "Our Air Mail" and I hope I'm lucky this time. I am interested in the cinema, stamp collecting, dancing, writing and many other things. All letters will be answered, as age is no barrier.

ROSALIE HEART

No 1 Hussey Avenue
Spanish Town
Jamaica, B.W.I.

Stay-in

Dear Editor:

I'm a young man, 35 years old, single, with brown hair and blue eyes. I am confined to a chest hospital and I expect to be here for at least a year. I would like to receive letters during this time, and will exchange snapshots with anyone who would like to do so.

PAUL OGLE

Ingham Chest Hospital
Lansing, Michigan

Farm Friend

Dear Editor:

I am a lonely farm boy of 17, 5′11″ tall, with blond hair and blue eyes. I like practically all music, and sports. Sure would like to have some pen pals, so come on, everyone, write to me.

LESLIE HOWARD

Route 2
Vanceboro, North Carolina

Who'll be Marilyn's number 3 husband?

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TRAIL DUST

PARDNERS! Here's an open invitation to you to cut sign on colorful happenings of today's West. Send clippings to us, and include the name and date of the paper where you found it. We'll send you one dollar per usable item; in case of duplicates, first come, first served!

A STORE owner in Kansas City, Kans., thought the exposed position of his safe —in the floodlighted front window of his grocery—would protect it from thieves. But ingenious burglars quietly rolled the safe away at night, replacing it with a paper box of the same size.

KEEPING his feet cool by dangling them out his car window, while steering with one hand and pushing the foot pedals with a tree limb held in his other hand, a Detroit, Mich., motorist was tootling along the road at 20 miles an hour when police spotted him. Now he's cooling off in the local cooler.

SHADES of the rough frontier still persist in Nome, Alaska, where water is sold by the bucketful—eight buckets for $1—during the winter. The ground freezes so deep that conventional pipe systems are out of the question.

FOLKS in Lodi, Wis., were so impressed with a certain duck's regularity in nesting each year at the same local creek, that they held a festival in her honor this year. Some 8,000 people were on hand but, for the first time since 1947, the duck failed to show up.

THE PUBLIC library in St. Louis, Mo., held a "forgiveness day," when overdue books were accepted with no fines imposed and no questions asked. More than 1,700 volumes were returned, including one overdue for 33 years.

A FARMER in Grandin, Mo., blames a big bullfrog in his pond for keeping his pigs thin. He says that when the frog gives out with a bellow, the pigs, thinking it's someone calling them to eat, come a-running, and they're exercising all the fat off their bones.

ACCUSED of stealing and eating a candy bar, a Los Angeles, Calif., man won an acquittal when he showed the court he has only five teeth and none of them meet.

AN INSURANCE company in Boise, Ida., was caught with its policies down. When a rock crashed through a window in its office, red-faced officials had to admit the window wasn't covered by insurance.

IT'S OKAY to watch girls in Kalamazoo, Mich., but ogling—defined as "looking or glancing at furtively"—is against the law, under a new city ordinance.

A PARAKEET in Faribault, Minn., has developed a perfect squelch. When it becomes fed up with humans it demands, "I can talk; can you fly?"

ONE thief who's expected to return to the scene of his crime is a Dallas, Tex., burglar who stole 415 passes from a theatre.

RANCH
FLICKER TALK

by movie editor **BOB CUMMINGS**

This famous top-hand of stage, screen and TV corrals the best of the Westerns

RED SUNDOWN

Rory Calhoun fights on both sides of the law in Universal's new Western about a saddle tramp who becomes a professional gunman

IT WAS pure chance that Rory Calhoun happened to be on a horse when his movie career began. Of course, he had no idea that his movie career *was* beginning when he encountered Alan Ladd on a bridle path in the Hollywood Hills.

Going into films had never crossed his mind; in fact, he'd just barely heard of Alan Ladd. But because he was on a horse that day, Alan noticed him, got him a screen test, and Rory's been on a horse practically ever since.

His latest movie, *Red Sundown*, will soon be released by Universal. Rory's role is right down his alley. He plays a handsome, hot-tempered saddle tramp, who is drifting toward becoming a professional gunman, just because it seems the easiest way.

As the movie opens he's riding aimlessly across the Texas wastelands. He comes upon the lonely figure of James Millican, who has been severely wounded and left to die. After Rory has saved his life, the two become partners, even though James is a gunslinger. Thus Rory takes another step toward being a hired killer.

But the partnership doesn't last long. James is shot again in a gunfight, and just before he dies he makes Rory promise to stop living by the gun.

As other people in real life—as well as in the movies—have found out, it's easier to start a life of crime than to quit. Rory rides into Durango, where he gets hired by the sheriff, Dean Jagger, as his deputy. Dean hires him only because trouble is brewing between the ranchers, who want open range, and the settlers, who want fences. A strong right hand with a gun in it is needed on the side of the law, instead of on the side of anyone who will pay for it.

Dean's daughter, Martha Hyer, has even less faith in Rory. She predicts that a wealthy rancher, Robert Middleton, will offer to make a deal with Rory, and that Rory will accept.

So Rory has two fights on his hands, one against the law-breakers in town, and one

against himself. How he does it—if he does it—is something you'd better see for yourself, before I give away the whole story.

I asked Rory which movie was his favorite, and he grinned and said, "This one."

He had a very special reason, whose name is Lita Baron—also known as Mrs. Rory Calhoun. This is their first movie together. In it Lita plays the inappropriate role of Rory's ex-girl friend, who now has the rich rancher's brand on her.

There's nothing "ex" about Lita as Rory's wife, though. They've been married since 1948, and they never give the gossip columnists anything to whisper about. Whenever their pictures appear in the papers they're much more likely to be beaming at each other than at the camera.

Martha Hyer was enjoying herself in *Red Sundown,* too. Martha's a Texas girl and, until she was 14, she was determined to be a cowgirl.

"Whenever I'm offered a part in a Western," she said, "I get all excited hoping *this* time I'll get to play a real ridin', ropin' cowgirl, instead of just the hero's sweetheart. It hasn't happened yet, but I still enjoy the excitement of action movies."

Dean Jagger, who plays the sheriff in *Red Sundown,* is now one of the most sought-after actors in Hollywood, but it wasn't always that way. He had a long career as a handsome young leading man with wavy hair, making lots of B pictures and waiting for the break that would give him a part in a big picture.

When the break came along, he almost didn't take advantage of it. Fox offered him the part of a middle-aged air force officer in *Twelve O'Clock High.* The studio wanted Dean Jagger, all right, but not his toupee.

"No one ever turned from a juvenile into a character actor as fast as I did," Dean says, laughing. "Movie fans who'd seen me with my hair on didn't even recognize me without it, so I guess I could have put the toupee back on and been a young juvenile again. But I just didn't want to. Winning an Oscar was part of the reason, but the biggest part was that it was so much fun just being myself."

Rory Calhoun helps with Martha Hyer's dishwashing chores

JAMES MILLICAN
In a Happy Rut

RANCH FLICKER TALK

I'LL BET you can't name the actor who holds the record for having played the greatest number of Western parts. I'll admit I couldn't have, until he told me himself.

It's James Millican, who lays claim to 147 different roles in Westerns, and thinks he may have lost count of one or two. He has played gunmen and sheriffs, cowboys and ranchers, stage drivers, soldiers, and even town loafers.

Jim was born in the wide-open spaces of New Jersey, so being a Westerner doesn't exactly come naturally to him. But being an actor does. His father was Frederick S. Millican, who learned show business from no less an expert than P. T. Barnum. Later his father produced his own circus tent show, and played before such celebrities as President Theodore Roosevelt, William McKinley and William Howard Taft. He even could claim (and often did) a command performance "before a crowned head in Europe," i.e. George V of England.

Young Jim, however, never got the circus into his blood. He had a normal upbringing in Southern California, and his greatest ambition was to be a baseball player. His chance came when he was a Junior at U.S.C., so he promptly left college to join the Pacific Coast League. His career was short-lived, however, because after three months he injured his hand and had to retire permanently from the diamond.

He got into the movies, he says, through the back door at MGM. That was the door he used coming and going from his job as secretary to the late producer Irving Thalberg.

"I admired him tremendously," says Jim. "Everybody did. He was a genius. I hadn't thought of being an actor till then, but when he said I should try it, who was I to argue?"

His first part was a bit in a Buck Jones Western. "I got into my rut early," says Jim, "and I've been jogging along happily in the same Western rut ever since."

Once or twice he has strayed off the range —or out of the rut—as in *Sign of the Cross* and *Strategic Air Command,* but he's always happy to get back in again.

"I guess I think of acting as a job, not a career," he told me, "I'd much rather have steady work than spectacular stardom—a nice quiet life with no spotlights."

The Millicans are proof that Hollywood life doesn't have to be headline-haunted. They're about to celebrate their twenty-fifth wedding anniversary, and Jim says with a twinkle in his eye that it's too late to change his way of life now.

It's my guess he has never wanted to change. They've a son and a daughter, and Mrs. Millican has managed to raise them quietly, run a charming house, and still keep up her own reputation as Dorothy Griffith, the film fashion designer.

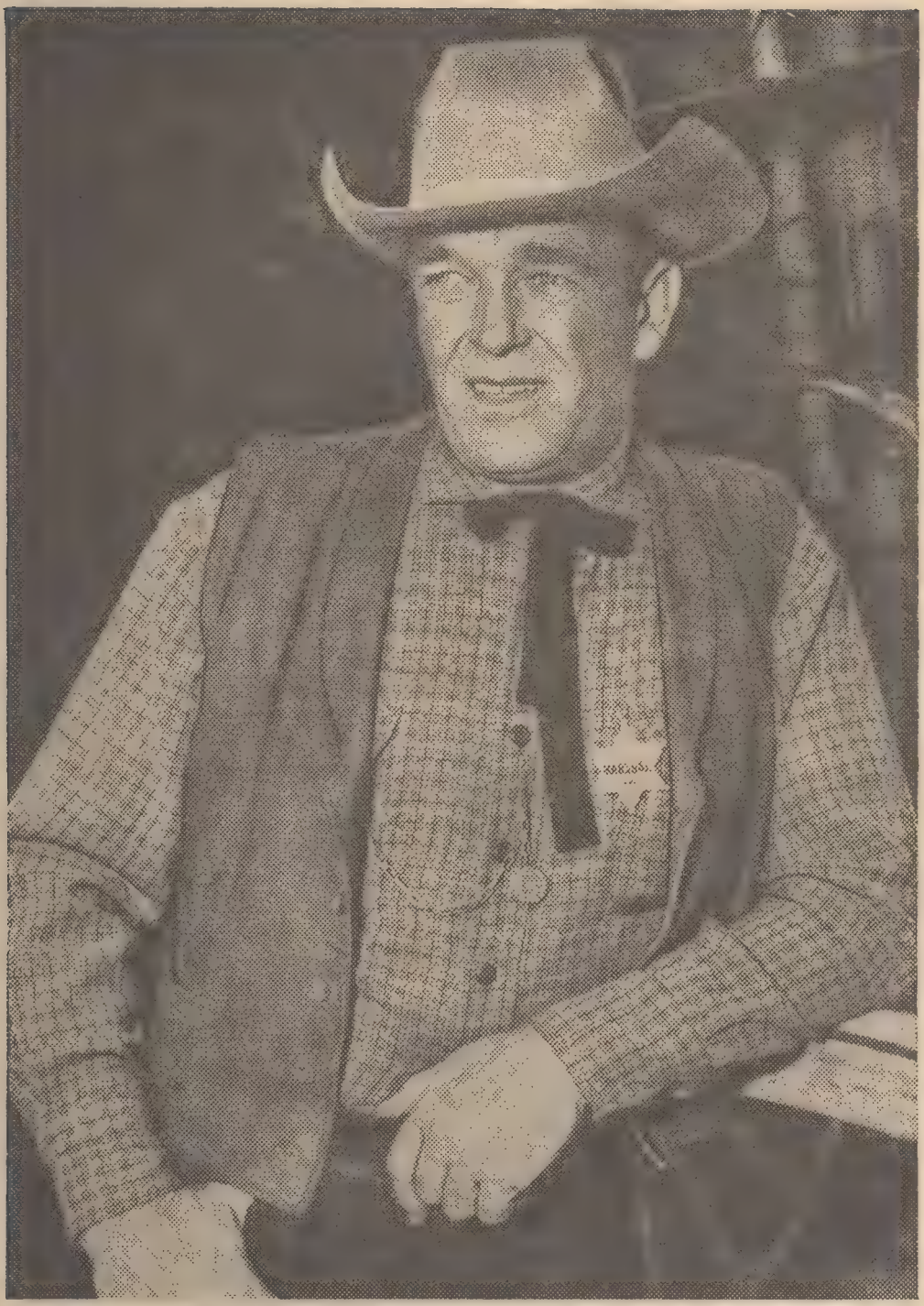
Jim may be a little vague on the exact number of Western roles he has played, but he can tell you, to a man, how many hombres he's killed on film. In every part he uses his own sixgun, a venerable .45 Colt Frontier model. The first time he knocked off a character in a movie, he notched the handle of his gun. He's gone on notching through the years, until he's got more notches than handle on that gun.

"Seventy-three," he said to me, handing over the Colt. "Count em."

I begged off. The wood looked as though it had been chewed up by a litter of puppies.

"Seventy-three men!" I said. "That's quite a record. But what are you going to do in your next role? You haven't room here for a seventy-fourth."

"I know it," Jim admitted. "I'll either have to get into a new line of work, or get a new sixgun. I just can't bear to do either."

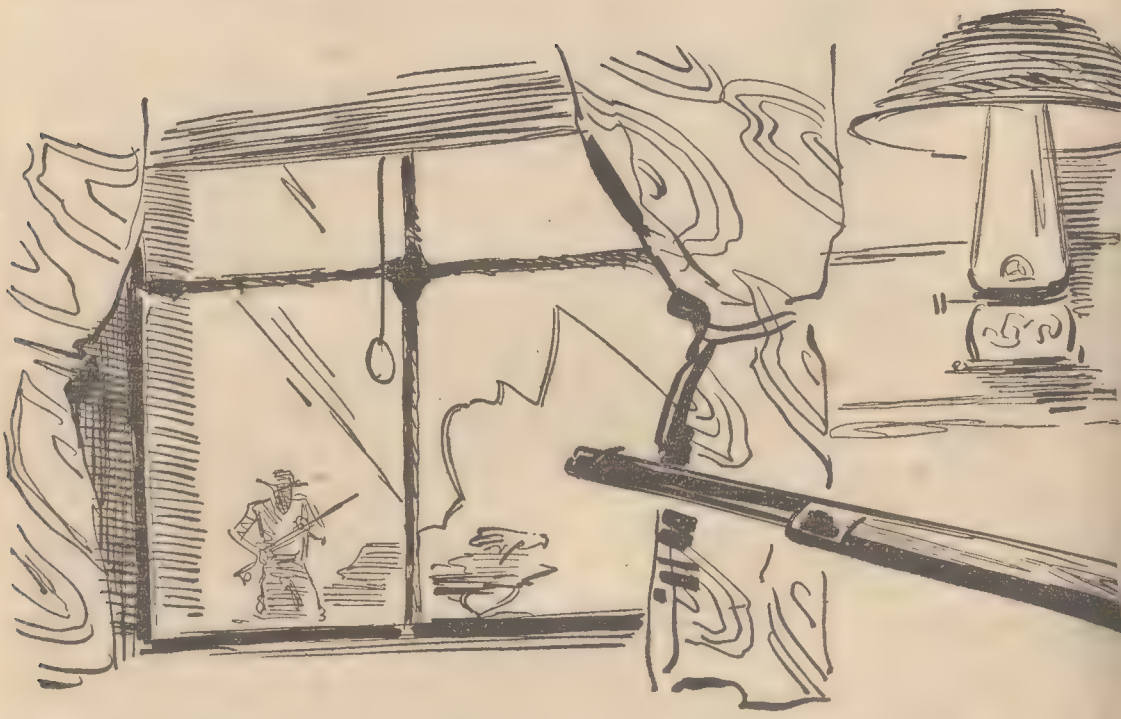


United Artists

Jim has played in more Westerns than anyone else in Hollywood

Guns of Cibola

by RAY G. ELLIS



DUDE BEN SWIRL meant to prove to Lucy that he was fit for this wild, strange country . . . if the outlaws would let him live that long

THE train slowed with a roll and a jerk. Ben Swirl got to his feet and reached for the bag on the luggage shelf over his head. It was a black bag, betraying the fact that Ben Swirl was a doctor as surely as high-heeled boots betrayed a cowboy.

Swirl took the bag and moved toward the front of the car, then out onto the vestibule. He was a big man, not over thirty, with a square jaw and bright, dark eyes. Except for his garb he might have been of the West, for he was wide of shoulder and slim of hip, a man who moved confidently but without arrogance.

"Well, Doc, we're just about there," said the black-suited

conductor, who was standing beside the open door of the car. "This is Cibola, the population center of ten-thousand square miles of the wildest and roughest country you ever saw. Cibola, the toughest town this side of Tombstone, Arizona." He turned and looked up into Swirl's face. "You scared, Doc?"

Swirl smiled and said, "When a tough man is sick, he calls for a doctor the same as anyone else." His voice was thick with a Boston accent, and the conductor grinned. "With that accent of yours, I reckon you'll be in for some ribbing—or worse."

The train rounded a curve in the tracks and Swirl had to steady himself against the side of the car. Through the open door he saw the land drop away from the tracks and then, far in the distance, rise abruptly to high jagged peaks.

"What do you mean by that?" Ben Swirl asked.

The conductor shoved back his hard cap and scratched his head. He said, "Folks out here don't take to Easterners too well, especially those with an accent like yours. Don't know just why, but they don't trust a man with an accent."

"What about the other doctor, the one that died?" Swirl asked.

The conductor smiled and stared out the door. "Old Doc Salader? He was raised on a ranch in Texas. He went East to school, then came out here to New Mexico. He left some mighty big shoes to fill—or I should say boots."

The train slowed to a crawl as it slid into the yards at Cibola. They passed loading pens and rows of freight cars, then jolted across a switch and pulled in beside a small red-and-yellow station. Over the doorway of the small building, Swirl read a sign in black letters on a white background. "Cibola, Elev. 4,829."

Swirl looked at the group of loiterers around the station and stepped out onto the platform. He wore a black frock coat and black trousers. On his head was a narrow-brimmed Eastern hat.

"Good luck, Doc," the conductor called after him.

All eyes turned his way at the words, and Swirl suddenly found himself the center of an intense scrutiny. One cowboy nudged another and said something out of the corner of his mouth. They both laughed.

Swirl moved to the shade of the building and looked about him. The train stood hissing at the station like some angry dragon, while behind him the town of Cibola stretched away from the station.

The main street was rutty and uneven. A wagon turned the corner and continued down the street, a cloud of dust rising behind it. False-fronted buildings raised ornate facades skyward, and it was all, including the people, sunbaked and wind blasted to a single shade, the color of a dun horse.

A man approached, his eyes studying Swirl critically. He wore black flannel pants, a denim shirt, and a leather vest. On his head was a great, wide-brimmed sombrero, and from his mouth hung a cigarette.

"You the new doctor?" the man asked. When Ben nodded, the man stuck out a hand and added, "Pleased to meet you. Name's Luke Tally. I'm mayor of this town."

Swirl took the hand and shook it, surprised at the strength of the grip of this lean man. He was surprised too at the clothes the mayor wore, and it showed on his face.

Tally said, "We're not fancy out here, Doc. You'll get used to it before long. I reckon you'd like to see your office and get out of those clothes."

They moved off the platform and crossed the street. Swirl asked, "Exactly what's the matter with my clothes?"

Tally grinned, listening closely to Swirl's precise English. He said, "I reckon you might want to get rid of that Boston talk, too, Doc."

Anger stirred in Ben, and it showed in his voice when he said, "You sent East for a doctor, and I'm what you got. All I've heard since I got here are remarks about the way I talk and dress. I happen to be a doctor, not a cowboy."

Tally snorted through his nose. "Just trying to make things a little easier for you, that's all," he commented. He looked at Swirl through squinted eyes. "You never

practiced anywhere else before, did you, Doc?"

Swirl shook his head.

"A doctor is supposed to inspire confidence, they tell me. Now if you want to do that, you'd better get out of those clothes and barber your language. You don't expect folks to put their trust in somebody who looks like he just came off the stage of a theatre."

They passed into the shade of an awning over the walk. Swirl stared through dusty windows at the goods displayed inside. It was like traveling to a foreign country, this coming to New Mexico. The people spoke a form of the same language, but that seemed to be the only similarity between Cibola and Boston.

They passed two fat Mexican women, talking rapidly in their native tongue, and then passed a sullen-faced Indian. A cowboy came toward them in his rolling gait, staring at Swirl with surprised eyes.

Tally's voice broke in upon Swirl's thoughts, touching upon the exact thing that Swirl had been thinking about. "Not like Boston, is it, Doc?" Tally asked. "They are all your patients. Hope you have a little stake. Thing'll be slow at first. Then, too, most of these folks take their time about paying."

Ben's right hand went to his pocket automatically. He fingered the double eagle coin there. That was all the money he had in the world. He had come that close to not having enough money to complete his medical training.

"I guess I can see it through," he told the mayor.

They stopped before a doorway and Tally said, "This is it, Doc. Here's your office."

AS THEY entered, Swirl saw Dr. Salader's sign over the doorway and permitted himself to dream a little, imagining his own name there.

The office was narrow, high-ceilinged, and stuffy from being closed. Along one wall was a row of books, and Swirl recognized some medical journals. He had been told in the letter that Dr Salader had left everything to the next doctor, and he felt a moment of affection for this man he had never met. Salader had died of a heart attack several months before.

"I'll leave you to get settled." Tally said, moving toward the door. "If there's anything you want, my place is the saddleshop a couple of doors up the street. Your trunks'll be along in a few minutes."

After the mayor left, Ben moved about the office, then through a door into the examination room. It was all so simple, almost crude, that he wondered how a man could operate in such a place.

Farther back in the building, behind the examination room, was another room, his living quarters. There was a narrow bed, a scratched and cigarette-burned dresser, and a rocking chair. A back door led into an alley.

Swirl opened the door and felt the fresh air sweep through the office. He tossed his hat on the bed, then looked at himself in the mirror over the dresser. "Dr. Benjamin Swirl," he said aloud.

Vigorous knocking interrupted his thoughts and he moved toward the front of the building. Patient number one, he thought.

He went through the examination room and into the reception room. A young woman stood white-faced in the middle of the room. She was dressed in gingham, once bright colored but now somewhat faded from many washings. Her dark hair, long and luxurious, had a light mantle of dust over it. She regarded Ben with wide, frightened eyes.

"Grandfather had another attack," she blurted out. "You've got to come right away."

Without a word Swirl picked up his bag and went to the door, opening it for the girl. Then he said, "I'll have to get a horse from the stable."

"Never mind that. I brought the buckboard."

The wagon stood at the walk. As they hurried toward it, Swirl noticed the curious, staring eyes that followed him. He helped the girl up onto the seat and hopped in after her. He picked up the reins, but she grabbed them from him.

"I'll take those," she said, and whipped the team into motion.

The two horses leaned into the traces, and they left Cibola at a dead run, the wagon jumping wildly from rut to rut. Outside of town the road smoothed out somewhat, and Swirl settled down on the hard seat. The road twisted and turned over the rough country. Steep-sided ravines cut across the land, giving it a treacherous, foresaken appearance.

For some distance they rode in silence. Then the girl said, above the rumble of the buckboard, "You forgot your gun—or don't you own one?"

Swirl glanced at her to see if she were kidding him, but her face was deadly serious as she stared down the road ahead of them. "What do I need a gun for? I'm supposed to repair, not kill."

"This is wild country, doctor. There's many a man who wouldn't hesitate to slit your throat for a dollar."

He smiled and said, "You don't sound very worried."

"I'm a woman," she told him simply.

He studied her, liking the way she sat straight on the seat. Her brown arms held the reins firmly and he got the feeling that she, and the rest of the people he had seen, were adept at taking care of themselves except, perhaps, in an extreme emergency such as the present one.

After another period of silence, she said, "You're Ben Swirl. I'm Lucinda Carstair. Everybody calls me Lucy."

Again she lapsed into silence, and a short time later they rode into the yard of a small group of ranch buildings. She pulled the team to a stop before a picket fence that would need another coat of paint before long. The house was low to the ground and was made of adobe, although the barn behind it was of wood.

The girl jumped from the seat before Ben had a chance to help her down, and headed

SHERIFF WALKER KNIGHT

STACY GRATTEN

ELDON CARSTAIR

for the house. Ben grabbed his bag and hurried up behind her. They passed through a small living room that was simply furnished, and into a bedroom at the back of the house. An ancient-looking man lay in a large bed, his face a yellowish color. In a glance Ben knew he was looking at death. Then the old man opened his eyes and looked at them.

"I brought the doctor, gramps," Lucy said.

The old man shifted his eyes to Ben, studying him for some time. Finally he said in a weak tone, "Dang Easterner."

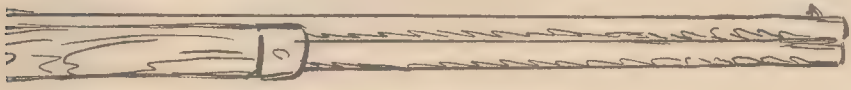
Ben went to the old man's bedside and felt for his pulse. It was weak and unsteady. He motioned for the girl to leave the room.

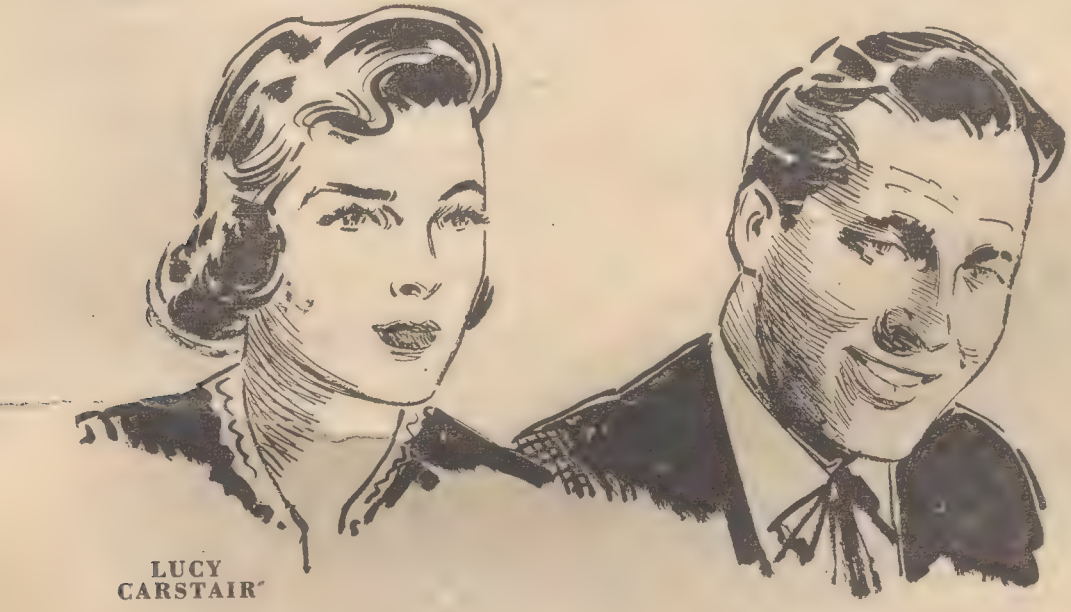
When she was gone the old man said, "You're wasting your time here, Doc. My clock's run down."

Ben stood by helplessly, knowing that what the old man said was true. But he said, "Maybe not, old timer. A clock can be wound up again."

The old man smiled. "Not when the spring's broken." Then, "I'm your first patient, ain't I?"

Swirl nodded, and the old man went on talking, his voice growing weaker with each





LUCY CARSTAIR

DR. BEN SWIRL

word. "Wish I could help you. Won't look good to have your first patient dying. Wish I could have died for old Doc Salader."

He closed his eyes then and Ben walked quietly out of the room. Lucy stood at one window in the living room. At the sound of Ben's entrance she turned, her eyes asking a question.

"I don't think there's a chance in the world," Ben told her.

"Aren't you doing anything?" she asked.

He shrugged. "There's nothing to do. Everybody dies sometime."

Her voice grew harder as she said, "You can't just let him die."

BEN said nothing, knowing the helpless feeling that possessed the girl, for it possessed him, too. He searched for words with which to explain to her, and found none. What was there to explain? A man lived, grew old and worn out, and died.

"Old Doc used to give him a drink of whisky when he was down," Lucy told him.

"We won't do that," Ben said in a firm voice. "Perhaps Salader thought he needed a stimulant, but that would kill him now."

"You know more than Doc Salader, I suppose," Lucy said angrily. "Well, let me tell you this: if gramps dies you'll never get another patient. I'll see to that."

She moved away from him and he grabbed her arm, turning her toward him, his own temper short now. "There's nothing to be done," he reiterated. "Can't you understand that?"

"I understand that my grandfather is dying in there and you won't lift a hand to help him," she cried, twisting from his grip.

She ran to the kitchen, reappearing in a moment with a whisky bottle and a glass. In two strides Ben had crossed the room. He grabbed the bottle from the girl and threw it through an open window. It shattered noisily on rocks outside.

She turned on him then, swinging a tiny fist like a man might. Swirl caught her arm in one of his hands and grabbed her other arm. He shook her gently and she began to cry. She leaned against him, sobbing, and he began to pat her back lightly as if she were a child. Presently her crying stopped and she shoved away from him, realizing suddenly where she was.

"You'd better go in now," Ben told her, leading her to the door of her grandfather's bedroom.

She said nothing but, from the look in her eyes, Ben knew that she hadn't forgiven him. She detached herself from his grasp and went into the room.

The old man stared vacantly at the ceiling and his lips moved, trying to form words. Finally he said, "Where's Eldon? Tell him I want to see him."

"All right, gramps," Lucy said quietly. She took the old man's hand in her own and massaged it gently for some time.

He managed to gasp the name, Eldon, once more. Then his head rolled to one side and his whole body went limp. For some time Ben stood behind the girl, knowing that she knew her grandfather was dead.

Swirl touched her shoulder and said, "I'm sorry, Lucy."

When she had left the room, he pulled the sheet up over the old timer's head and followed Lucy. She turned and faced him, standing rigidly in the middle of the living room.

"Everybody loved him," she said bitterly. "Now you've let him die."

"Lucy—"

"He's the last patient you'll have," she cried, the words tearing from her throat savagely. "He didn't even get a chance to see Eldon."

Swirl with his own nerves on edge from the events of the day, said, "You should have sent for this Eldon when you were in town. It wouldn't have taken a minute."

"I don't know where he is. We haven't heard from him in months."

"Is he your husband?"

"Brother." She turned away, her temper receding. "I'll take you back to town."

They rode in silence, slowly this time, with Ben driving the team over the dusty road. He felt sorry for the girl, because it had not been many years since that he had lost his own parents, and he remembered clearly the emptiness the loss had brought.

The air was hot and dry, and presently Ben shrugged out of his coat, dropping it on the seat between them. He said, "You'll be all alone out there now."

She nodded, and he added, "Perhaps your brother will help you run the ranch."

She looked at him with a bitter expression. "He wouldn't turn a finger. Who do you think has been running it all along? I have, that's who. Eldon had to go looking for excitement, drinking and carrying on with the worst men of Cibola—and they don't come much worse than that. I don't know where he is and couldn't care less."

Her last words lacked conviction, and Swirl guessed that Lucy and Eldon had been close at some time in the past. Although her dislike of him was plain, Swirl couldn't help but have a certain respect for her spunk, her independence. Yet underneath it all he felt she was a gentle woman, perhaps not quite as sure of herself as she professed to be.

It was mid-afternoon when they drove into Cibola. Swirl pulled the wagon to a stop in front of his office. For a long moment he sat silently. Then, with a sigh, he climbed from the buckboard, taking his bag and coat with him.

"How much do I owe you, Doctor?" Lucy asked.

He looked up at her and saw that she was staring straight ahead down the street.

"Nothing."

Without a word she slapped the team into motion with the reins, and the wagon moved off down the street. Ben Swirl stared after it. The wagon stopped near the end of the block and Lucy climbed down and disappeared into a doorway.

Swirl went into his office and began to sort through things. Dr. Salader had left him a wealth of informative books. He had also left instruments and, most important of all, a file cabinet full of case histories.

On a hunch Swirl looked through the file until he found the name of Lucy's grandfather, Johnson Carstair. Under the name Dr. Salader had written merely, "Bad heart." Swirl thought of finding Lucy and showing her the card, but his pride wouldn't let him move from the office. There was no reason in the world why he should feel that he had to prove anything to her.

IT WAS some time later that he heard the front door open. He went into the reception room and faced a tall, slender man. On the man's vest was pinned a silver star. A single pistol with a worn handle hung at his right hip. Swirl was startled at the youthfulness of the lawman's face.

"You're the new doctor?" the man said.

"Ben Swirl," he said, shoving out a hand.

"I'm Walker Knight, sheriff of this county," the lawman said curtly. "You report all gunshot wounds to me, understand?"

Unfriendliness lay close under the surface, betrayed by Knight's curt manner. Swirl remembered an old proverb, "Clothes make the man," and wondered if his own clothes could have that much effect on everybody he met. Certainly he hadn't heard a friendly word since he had arrived in Cibola. But it went deeper than his being an Eastener, Ben found, when Knight spoke next.

"Old man Carstair died," the sheriff stated. "He was one of the first settlers in these parts. Folks thought a lot of him."

A knot of anger formed in Swirl at Knight's accusing tone of voice. He said, "He was old. He had to go sometime."

"Maybe so. Miss Carstair says that you didn't lift a finger to save him. You threw out the whisky that Doc Salader always gave him."

"When I tell you how to run your business, then you can tell me how to run mine, Sheriff," Swirl said hotly.

Knight's thin face darkened in a scowl, his gray eyes hard. "You've been here less than six hours, Swirl," he said, "but you have a mighty poor reputation already."

The lawman went to the door and pulled it open. Before he went out, he reminded Swirl, "Don't forget to report gunshot wounds."

Ben watched the sheriff move off down the street. If he had been a less serious man, he would have laughed at his present situation. It seemed as if he had been caught in a flood tide of events and had been flung here and there without control. Before he

had had a chance to catch his breath, his reputation had been ruined and the whole town seemed to be looking at him with suspicion, even anger.

Still, he understood Lucy's motive in telling of her grandfather's death. He had seen people do many strange things in time of grief, things they would never think of doing at any other time. At the ranch Lucy had sensed his helplessness, and had taken it for incompetence. Now she felt she was doing the people of Cibola a service by warning them about the new doctor. He put the thoughts from him, knowing that it would do no good to brood over them.

It was after supper when the restlessness hit him. He was slumped in one of the worn chairs in the office, smoking a cigar. Through the front windows he could see people passing up and down the street in the fading light.

Some distance up the street the lights of a saloon caught his eye. One way to get acquainted with the town, at least a certain part of it, was to be seen. He shoved out of the chair and went out onto the street.

The town had grown more lively with the coming of evening. The walks were crowded now, cowboys mingling with men from the silver mines ten miles or so up in the hills. An occasional Mexican moved silently along the walk under a bright-colored serape.

Swirl moved on down the street to the saloon. Over the walk hung a sign that announced its name as "The Lode." He stopped outside and looked over the green-colored batwing doors.

The room was filled with men and smoke, and a babble of voices drifted out onto the street. For a moment Swirl compared the saloon and its inhabitants with a tavern he had known back in his native New England. He grinned and decided that Cibola was so different from New England there was no comparison.

After shoving inside, he made his way to the bar by a circuitous route. Poker, monte and faro were being dealt at various tables, and Swirl was surprised at the amount of money these poor-looking people were betting.

"What'll it be?" asked the bartender.

Swirl looked along the bar and saw that nearly everyone was drinking raw whisky. He ordered the same.

It was some time later that he noticed eyes focused on him. They belonged to a man who stood down the bar from him. The eyes were bloodshot, peering at him from a craggy, unshaven face.

Recognition came and the man shouted, "Hey, there's the new doctor. He took whisky from a dying man."

Silence spread outward from the bar in a wave, until there was only a faint murmuring of voices from the corners of the room. As if at a signal, the men between Swirl and the speaker moved away from the bar.

Somebody behind Swirl said quickly, "That's Stacy Gratten, Doc. You'd better hightail it out of here."

Ben looked at the man called Gratten. He was big, as tall as Ben and probably twenty pounds heavier. Huge hands dangled near the pistols at his sides. His mouth was pulled back in a yellow-toothed grin. A wide-brimmed hat was shoved back on his head, revealing black, unkempt hair. He moved to within four feet of Swirl.

BEN tensed at the expectation of trouble. It had been a long time since he had done any fighting. He knew he should be afraid of Gratten but, searching his feelings, found no fear there.

"You took whiskey from a dying man, Doc," Gratten repeated. "Then you stood by and watched him die."

Ben eyed Gratten narrowly. He said, "I don't see where that's any concern of yours, Mr. Gratten. There was nothing I could do."

For the first time in his life, Swirl was conscious of his Boston accent. It fell upon the room, sounding strange, foreign. Eyes that had been expressionless turned hostile. But it was more than just looks; hostility descended over the room like a blanket.

"Maybe there's something I can do," Gratten said. "We thought a lot of Mr. Carstair."

Murmurs of agreement came from the men around them. There was no doubt in Ben's

mind that Gratten was merely talking to get the crowd on his side. He didn't need to be told that Gratten was not in the same class with the Carstairs. This was just Gratten's way of livening up the evening.

"My guess is that Carstair wouldn't pass the time of day with you, Gratten," Ben said, knowing he was asking for trouble.

Gratten's eyes glittered in the lantern light, and his hands drew closer to his guns.

Somebody behind Swirl said, "He has no gun, Gratten."

Gratten's eyes searched Ben's coat for a tell-tale bulge at the waist. He moved forward a step and reached for the front of Ben's coat, saying, "Let's see what's under there, Doc."

Ben swung hard and caught Gratten on the side of the head, the blow sounding like the flat of a cleaver slapped against a side of beef. Gratten staggered back, rocking against the bar, shaking his head. He rubbed the side of his face, and then his hand strayed downward toward the gun on his hip.

"You going to shoot an unarmed man, Gratten?" Swirl asked.

Gratten stared at Ben for a moment, then grinned crookedly. His hands went to the buckle of his cartridge belt and he unfastened it, dropping it on the bar.

"I'm not going to shoot you, Doc," he ripped out savagely. "I'm going to tear you apart with my bare hands."

Excitement sang through Ben Swirl as he said, "I'm waiting."

Gratten charged eagerly, his fists like knots on the end of two clubs. Ben moved aside quickly, dodging Gratten's first blow, and sent a straight left to Gratten's head. It caught the big man below the eye and stopped his rush with a jolt. Gratten was no fool. He recognized in Swirl a man who was quick as lightning, and he slowed his pace.

They circled each other. Ben moved in, suddenly, shifting his attack to Gratten's heavy mid-section. He slammed three piston-like blows into Gratten before Gratten hit him again. The huge fist caught Ben above the ear, knocking him off balance. Ben staggered backward into the crowd. They caught him and shoved him into Gratten.

This was now Gratten's kind of fight. Ben was still hazy when Gratten drove another fist into his face, ripping open the flesh over his cheekbone. Ben was staggered and nearly blacked out for a moment. He covered his head with his arms. Gratten came in again, clubbing at him viciously, the grin widening on his face.

Ben backed away, playing for time. His head began to clear a little and he slashed at Gratten without warning. The blow caught the big man on the point of the chin, staggering him. When he didn't go down, Swirl realized what a mountain of stamina and power he was up against.

They stood toe to toe then, throwing punches. Ben stepped back suddenly, catching Gratten off balance, then drove in with all his strength, throwing his right fist at the other man's face.

The blow was high. It smashed into Gratten's nose and flattened it. Gratten howled in pain and rage. Blood spurted from his nose and covered the front of his shirt.

Ben stepped back, his chest heaving, gasping for breath. His arms felt like lead pendulums and he wondered if he could lift them again.

They eyed each other for a moment; then Gratten tore into him. With Gratten it was now a matter of kill or be killed. Ben brought his arms up as Gratten slammed into him, knocking him back into the ring of men about them.

A hard voice in his ear growled, "Get in there and fight, Doc."

He felt himself being shoved. Somebody put a booted foot in front of him and he fell heavily. Gratten kicked viciously at his ribs. It caught him low down, knocking the wind out of him. Ben tried to rise, shoving upward with his hands, his head hanging loosely from his shoulders. Gratten jumped astride his back, grabbing his hair and shoving his head toward the floor. The big man's weight was too much to bear, and Ben dropped flat on his stomach.

How many times Gratten slammed his face into the sawdust-covered floor, Ben

didn't know. But suddenly Gratten was no longer there and the animal howling of the crowd was stilled. With a great effort Ben rolled over and sat up.

"We got us a real doctor this time," a nearby voice said in disgust.

Ben looked up and saw Sheriff Knight standing over him. "Get up," the sheriff ordered.

Ben pulled his feet under him and started up. Knight grabbed the back of his coat and hauled him roughly. A path opened before them, and Knight ushered Ben toward the door. Ben glanced back at the bar and saw Gratten leaning on his elbows, with his back to the bar. The front of his shirt was covered with blood and his chest was still heaving with his recent exertion. He regarded Ben without expression.

"He would have killed you if I hadn't come in and stopped him," Knight told him when they were out on the street. "I heard the howling of that mob clear to the other end of town."

"Thanks, Sheriff," Ben said, touching the tender places on his face with a bruised hand.

"Don't thank me," Knight said harshly. "I have no love for you, but I've got less for that killer Gratten. He's not much more than an animal."

Ben flexed his hands and said, "They're not broken, at least. A doctor's hands are his most important tools."

KNIGHT stared at him through the darkness of the street. "You're not staying here?" he exclaimed.

"Of course I'm staying."

As if he hadn't heard Ben's answer, Knight said, "I'll put you on the train East tomorrow. We'll get another doctor somewhere."

"I'm not leaving," Ben insisted. "I came out here to be Cibola's doctor, and that's exactly what I'm going to be."

Knight shook his head and muttered, "Some people don't know when to quit."

They stopped on the walk in front of Ben's office. Ben sensed that Knight had something more on his mind, and he waited until the sheriff spoke again.

"Gratten's a bad customer, Doc," Knight told him. "There's a gang of thieves and cutthroats operating in the mountains around here. They've stolen silver from the mines, held up travelers and killed more than one. Three days ago a bunch held up the bank here. I wounded one of 'em, but they got away."

"What's that got to do with me?"

"I'm just warning you to watch your step, since you're set on staying in town. Rumor has it that Gratten's the big gun among the outlaws, although I haven't any proof."

Ben shoved open the door to his office, saying, "Thanks again, Sheriff, but I don't think Gratten will be bothering me."

Knight shook his head. "For a greenhorn, you sure got yourself into a peck of trouble in a big hurry."

Knight walked off then, his hard heels tapping rythmically on the board walk.

The next morning Swirl came awake with a start, feeling the bruises on his body begin to throb. He lay on the narrow, hard bed in the back room of his office, staring at the ceiling and listening. For a minute there was no sound. Then a dark form moved into the doorway that led to the front office.

"What is it?" Ben asked, his voice shattering the stillness.

Faint light filtered into the room through the back windows and reflected from the short barrel of a gun.

"Just relax, Doc. I have a job for you."

Ben recognized Gratten's heavy voice. He swung out of bed and began to dress. Eventually he asked, "What kind of a job is it?"

"A man's been hurt, shot. I've got a couple of horses out front. You can ride, can't you?"

Ben smiled into the darkness and said drily, "I'll manage."

He finished dressing and went toward the front of the building, picking up his bag as he went. When they reached the front door, Gratten jabbed the gun into his ribs and growled, "Don't make any noise, Doc. I wouldn't mind paying you back for this broken nose you gave me."

Ben went out the door. At the rail stood two horses. Gratten indicated one with a flourish of the barrel of his gun, then hol-

Ben lifted Eldon's frail body and moved out into the open . . .

stered the weapon. They rode from Cibola, heading west, then turned north into the mountains.

An almost-full moon lighted their way, throwing an eerie blue-white light over the landscape. It was rough, wild country, and Ben wondered how long it would take him to feel at home in it—or if he ever would.

He studied the country as they rode, trying to remember their course. Gratten noticed his interest and said, "Just forget where you're going, Doc. I'll bring you back down when you're finished."

Ben asid nothing, but continued to study the country.

There was a faint light in the eastern sky when they rode into the yard of a ramshackle ranch. They had dropped into a narrow valley, and the house was all but hidden by the trees that grew along the moisture-collecting low ground.

"That you, Gratten?" a voice asked.

"Yeah. I brought the doctor."

The man came out of dark shadows and looked at Ben closely. Then he said to Gratten, "Maybe you wasted your time. The kid's about done for."

Gratten dismounted. "Take a ride up the hill, Sim, and see that we weren't followed."

Ben dismounted as the man called Sim climbed on Gratten's horse and rode back the way they had come.

The injured man wasn't much more than a boy, Ben judged, when he had a lantern going in the house. He was lying on a bed in the front room. Several other men moved about shadow-like out of range of the lantern light, staring curiously at Swirl.

The boy had been shot in the chest. Dirty bandages were wrapped crudely around him. Ben opened his bag, took scissors, and began to cut away the cloth. The boy was unconscious, and Ben knew there wasn't too much chance of saving him. He judged that he had been shot two or three days before. When he had the bandages off, he examined the wound. Gratten hung over his shoulder, breathing heavily down on them.

"You think he'll pull through, Doc," Gratten asked.

Ben straightened up and said, "If the bullet doesn't do the job, that whisky on your breath will. Get back out of the way. Better yet, get some hot water."

Grumbling, Gratten turned and ordered another man to get the water. Then he turned back and said, "Dang kid is more trouble than he's worth. If I weren't so short-handed I wouldn't bother with him. See if you can keep from killing this one, Doc."

Ben said nothing. While he was waiting for the water, he studied the boy's face, seeing something familiar in it. He was thin-faced, with a small aquiline nose, and Ben knew he couldn't be over nineteen or twenty years old.

The bullet was lodged near the heart, a delicate thing to remove under the best of conditions. When the water arrived he had Gratten light several more lanterns, and then he began to probe for the slug.

HE WORKED slowly, carefully, hoping that the wound wouldn't hemorrhage when he drew out the bullet. His probe touched it and it was so near the boy's heart that he could feel the bullet move with each beat.

Half an hour, perhaps an hour, later—he had lost track of time—he drew the bullet out and disinfected the wound. Carefully he bandaged it up with clean clothes from his bag. When it was done he leaned back weakly, letting the nervous tenseness run out of him. Time would have to do its work now, either helping or killing.

"What do you think, Doc?" Gratten asked.

Ben shrugged. "There's a chance. He'll have to be kept absolutely still. Any movement at all could kill him. I don't want any loud talking."

Gratten began to move about the room, restless now that the operation was over. Ben sat watching the boy, seeing the slow movement of his chest in breathing.

Finally Gratten said, "Let's go, Doc. I've got to get you back to town."

Ben got to his feet, saying, "I can't leave him now. The danger of hemorrhage isn't over yet."

Gratten sighed, drawing his pistol wearily from the holster. "You're going back to town before Knight misses you and starts to hunt. Not that I think he could find you up here, but I don't like him combing the hills."

Too tired to argue, Ben got his bag and went outside. The sun was just coming over a ridge to the east, but to Ben it seemed as if it should be much later in the day than that.

They rode back the way they had come. When they were close to town but still out of sight of it, Gratten reined in and said, "You walk from here, Doc." Ben dismounted and handed Gratten the reins of his mount. "And, Doc," Gratten added, "your life won't be worth a plugged nickle if you tell Knight where you've been."

Ben walked away from Gratten without a word. He wouldn't tell Knight; he couldn't. If he did, Knight would organize a posse and go after Gratten. That would mean the boy would have to be moved.

Gratten called after him then, a hard humor in his voice. "Hey, Doc. If the kid comes around, I'll tell him he had the same doctor who killed his grandfather." Gratten laughed, reined around, and went pounding back into the hills.

Ben stared after him, dumbfounded. No wonder the boy had looked so familiar to him. He was Eldon Carstair. Swirl walked on down the draw, thinking, remembering. Knight had told him that he had shot a man in a bank holdup three days before.

Ben felt suddenly sorry for Lucy Carstair. She had had a hard road to travel the past two days, and now this would upset her even more. She had acted as if she hated Eldon for leaving the ranch, but Swirl knew that

was only a sham. He had detected worry in the girl's voice as she told him about Eldon.

Ben came into Cibola suddenly, emerging from the draw where it opened up on the edge of town. It was still early, and the night-living town was quiet. He took the alley that led behind his office and was soon in the back room. He slipped out of his shoes and flopped on the bed.

"Good morning, Doc."

Swirl, muscle-weary and on edge, jumped off the bed. Sheriff Knight regarded him from the front doorway of his room, a wry smile on his face. "Have you been somewhere, Doc?" he asked.

Ben ran a hand through his mussed hair and smiled back at the sheriff. "Just out for a little walk," he said, trying to sound fresh and wide awake.

"With your bag?"

"I always take it with me."

The smile dropped from the sheriff's face and was replaced by a scowl. He stepped on into the room. His voice came clipped and rapid when he spoke next.

"Look at those shoes and your rumpled clothes. Your eyes are so bloodshot you're in danger of bleeding to death. And you try to tell me you just went for a walk."

Ben sat down on the edge of his bed and asked wearily, "What do you want of me, Knight?"

"I want to know where you've been all night. Gratten slipped out of town when I was trying to catch a few winks. I came down here early this morning to see if you and Gratten had been at it again, only you weren't here."

Ben rubbed his face with the palms of both hands, speaking through them so that his words were muffled. "Let's just say I was treating a patient."

Knight moved across the room and stood over Swirl. He stood stiffly, tense, as if it were a great chore to contain himself.

"You were with Gratten," he said. "You found out where the hideout is, and now you're going to lead me there so I can clean out that rats' nest."

Ben said nothing, staring at Knight's booted feet, thinking of Eldon Carstair lying helpless in that—as Knight put it—rats' nest. Until the youth took a turn for the better—or worse—he could not be moved.

"No," Ben said firmly.

Knight's voice softened slightly as he said, "If you're afraid of what Gratten might do, and I wouldn't blame you if you were, then try to realize that he's more dangerous up in those hills running loose than down here in jail."

"You're wasting your time, Sheriff," Ben told him. "I'm worn out. If you don't mind I'll get some sleep now." He swung his feet back onto the bed and lay down, closing his eyes.

"If I find out you're shielding an outlaw," Knight said angrily, "I'll throw you in jail as fast as I would Gratten. Remember that." He strode angrily to the door, stopped, then swore under his breath and walked heavily out of the office.

IT WAS past noon when Ben awoke. He sat up stiffly, conscious of an empty stomach and tired, sore muscles. His trunks had arrived and were in the room. From them he got clean clothes. Then he went out to eat.

All through the meal, which he got in a small cafe down the street from his office, he debated whether to tell Lucy that he had found her brother. When he had made up his mind, he finished the meal in a hurry, then went to the livery stable down the street. As he passed Tally's saddle shop, the mayor of Cibola hailed him. Ben stopped, impatient at the delay.

"You made quite a day of it yesterday," Tally observed, grinning.

Ben shrugged and said, "It didn't help business any."

"Letting your first patient die and then brawling in a saloon isn't the best kind of advertising for a doctor, even in Cibola."

"I didn't *let* my patient die," Ben told him shortly. "There wasn't anything to be done, so I didn't do anything."

"That's probably so," admitted Tally, "but you got a hell of a reputation from it."

Ben bid the mayor good-by and moved off down the street. No wonder nobody had come into his office that morning for treatment.

From the way Tally had talked, Ben must be on the town's blacklist.

He found at the stable that Doc Salader had left a carriage and also a riding horse. Once again Ben was thankful for the generosity of Cibola's former doctor. He left the carriage in the stable and rode from town on Salader's sorrel gelding. Once on the road toward the Carstair place, he sent the sorrel forward at a lope. Not long afterward he rode into the yard at the ranch house.

Lucy met him at the door. He was startled to see her in black, and then realized that her grandfather had undoubtedly been buried that morning. She regarded him impassively.

He said, "I'd like to talk to you, Lucy."

She shoved open the door, and he went inside. As he passed her he noticed that her eyes were red rimmed from crying. He hesitated then, standing hat in hand in the center of the room.

Lucy turned toward him and asked quietly, "What is it, Dr. Swirl?"

"It's about Eldon."

For a moment life flickered in her eyes. But it died out again and she said tonelessly, "What about him?"

She had turned toward the window, but swung back after Ben spoke. "I saw him last night," he told her.

"You saw Eldon in town?"

He shook his head, hating to have to bring more grief upon this girl. "He's in the hills, a member of Gratten's gang. I had to remove a bullet from him."

"Is—he all right?" she asked hesitantly, as if afraid to hear his answer.

She was close to him now, looking into his eyes, her own eyes pleading with him to give her the right answer. He said quietly, "He was alive when I left him, but I can't promise anything."

She dropped her gaze. "He was the one that Knight shot the other day," she said. "He was holding the horses for the others and was the last to mount up and ride away."

He wanted to reach out and touch her, to comfort her. But he didn't, knowing that this was neither the time nor the place. Silence stretched between them.

Then she said, "He'll go to jail, won't he?"

"Not yet. I haven't told Knight where to find them."

She looked up at him, astounded. Her voice was bitter as she asked, "How much did Gratten pay you to keep quiet, Dr. Swirl?"

Anger rose swiftly in Ben. He said, "Your brother can't be moved, that's the reason I didn't tell Knight. I don't like Gratten and his kind any better than you do."

"Eldon only got what he deserved," she said. "Gramps warned him two years ago that he'd get into trouble."

"Maybe a little understanding would have helped him," Ben said hotly. "He's little more than a boy even now. Perhaps you expected too much from him. You tell a boy often enough that he's one thing and, sure as the world is round, that's what he'll become."

She slapped him and cried, "Get out. You've brought nothing but trouble with you."

He grabbed her by the shoulders, his temper flaring. "I'm going to help that boy, whether you will or not. I see how it happened now. You ruined him like you tried to ruin me, didn't you? When he showed signs of wildness you told the whole town that he was no good, just as you told the town that I had failed in my duty. That way you washed your hands of all responsibility, didn't you?"

She twisted, trying to free herself from his hard grasp. Tears came and she began to cry uncontrollably, her slight body shaking with her sobbing.

They stood facing each other until her sobbing subsided. "You accomplished what you came here for, Dr. Swirl," she said, pulling her lips into a firm line. "What more do you want?"

"What about Eldon?"

She seemed to draw inward at the mention of her brother. She said, "He's your patient. Why ask me about him?"

Ben strode past her and out of the house, angry with the stubbornness of the girl. She had built a wall around herself, cutting herself off from her brother in her anger at being left alone to run the ranch. How could she understand a boy's impatience to be free from home for a time? More than one wild one

had come back home later to settle down, a better man for having had his fling.

THE office was empty when he got back to town. He hadn't really expected to find anyone there, but hope was one thing that he had never been able to quell within himself. Someday Cibola would put its trust in him, he felt, but waiting till then would be hard.

It was a day and half a night before he rode out of Cibola again. He had spoken to no one in that time, nor had he received so much as a nod or a smile. It was as if he moved about the town invisible to all the inhabitants. As he rode into the hills toward the outlaw hideout, he thought wryly that it might even be a relief to talk to Gratten.

He crossed the first ridge and reined in behind a clump of brush, waiting. A half an hour later he rode on, satisfied that he was not being followed. The memory of the other ride was still fresh in his mind, and only once did he stray from familiar landmarks. The hideout was close, just over the next rise, when a horseman came out of the shadow of some rocks and blocked his path. The rider held a rifle trained on him.

As Ben drew closer he saw that it was the man called Sim. Sim squinted at him through the darkness, then exclaimed to nobody in particular, "Hell, it's the doctor."

"I want to see my patient," Ben told him.

"I don't remember hearing anybody say you'd been sent for, Doc. You know, you damn near got shot, riding up on me that way."

Ben's horse moved forward under his prodding, and Sim raised the gun. "I have a nervous finger, Doc. Don't get proddy. I'll take you in, but Gratten isn't going to like it."

Ben went on ahead, while Sim followed close behind. When they reached the house, Gratten came to the door and shouted, "Who have you got there, Sim?"

"The sawbones. He came riding in just as pretty as you please."

Gratten came toward them. "I thought I told you to forget this place, Swirl," he said in irritation.

"I'm responsible for that boy's life, Gratten," Ben told him. "I'd come through hell and high water if I had to."

"All right, all right. As long as you're here, you might as well have a look."

Ben dismounted and followed the outlaw into the house. Eldon Carstair was in bed, but now he was propped up on some pillows. On seeing this, Ben said, "I thought I told you not to move him, Gratten."

The big man grinned. "Aw, he got tired lying there on his back, Doc."

Ben grunted in disgust and went to the bedside. Gratten left the room, saying, "I want to see you before you leave, Doc."

Eldon's thin face was sallow. He studied Ben without expression as Ben said, "You were mighty close to the grave, son."

The boy said nothing, drawing his eyes away, staring at the far wall. He said in a sullen voice, "I might as well be dead as be holed up here."

Ben began to undress the wound to take a look at it. He said, "I thought you liked this life."

Eldon looked down at the doctor's busy hands, scowling. "Gratten told me you were there when my grandfather died."

Ben nodded. "That's right. He asked for you. He wanted to see you before he went."

"Don't make me laugh," Eldon said bitterly. "He thought I was a bum. He told me so often enough. So did Lucy."

The wound was still ugly-looking, raw, but the first signs of healing were apparent. Ben started to rewrap the boy's chest with fresh bandages. He said, "The last time I saw Lucy I was under the impression that she wanted you back to help run the ranch."

Eldon searched Ben's face with almost pitiful eagerness. "Would she let me come back?" he asked.

Ben smiled at him. "I think so," he said. "But you'll have to rest here for some time yet before it'll be safe to move you."

The hope died in the youth's eyes as quickly as it had sprung into them. Bitterness returned to his voice. He said, "Gratten's moving us all out tomorrow. He says this place isn't safe any more."

Ben got to his feet. "He won't move you," he stated positively.

Gratten's chuckle came from the doorway. He moved on into the room, the floor vibrating under his heavy tread. "You worry too much, Doc," Gratten said. "You said the boy couldn't be moved an inch, and look how he's sitting up. It didn't hurt him a particle."

Ben stared at the heavy face before him, wanting to smash his fist into it. Restraining himself with an effort, he said, "Moving him in bed is nothing compared to riding a horse. You'll murder him just as if you had shot him with your own gun."

The grin remained on Gratten's face. He held out one hand, palm up in a gesture of innocence. "I have a wagon outside, Doc. He'll ride in that."

A wagon driven slowly and carefully might be safe transportation for the youth, but Ben guessed how that wagon would be driven and knew a hemorrhage would start in the wound with the first hard jolt. He cautioned against it, but Gratten would not listen, growing ugly in the end so that Ben finally had to give up. At least he appeared to have given up. He packed his instruments back into his bag and started for the door.

Gratten grabbed his arm and turned him about. "Remember, Doc, keep your mouth shut. The kid will be the first one to go if the law comes after us. You wouldn't want that."

OUTSIDE, Ben mounted and rode from the house, heading out the way he had come. He rode past Sim, who was still on lookout duty, without a word. It was some time before he deemed it safe to circle off his trail and head back toward the hideout. Whether Gratten had posted other men in the hills about the rundown house, Ben didn't know, but that was a chance he'd have to take.

This kind of thing was so foreign to him that he didn't even have a definite plan to go by, except that he was determined to take Eldon Carstair away from Gratten before the outlaw had a chance to kill the boy.

By gently lifting and carrying Eldon from the house in his arms, he might be able to get far enough away so they wouldn't be found. It was a terrible chance to take with the boy's life, for he might bleed to death, but still it was better than leaving him to the mercy of Gratten's cutthroats.

It was a long ride around the ravine in which the house stood. Ben moved slowly, knowing that discovery would mean death. When he judged that he was due north of the house, he dismounted and went on foot in a southerly direction until he topped a ridge and looked down on the shadowy black rectangle of the house.

Slowly he made his way down the ravine. As he went, he placed in his mind the best way to return. A gully to his left led out of the ravine, and he marked that as his best way out.

The house was dark and quiet. He stopped at the front corner and surveyed the yard for some time. His heart was beating rapidly from his exertion and from the tense excitement that was in him. He moved on around to the front door and went inside. Glad now that he wasn't wearing the hard-heeled boots of the Westerner, he moved silently across the room to Eldon's bedside.

The boy was breathing slowly and regularly in sleep. For a long moment Ben hesitated beside the bed. He visualized in his mind that ugly wound in the youth's chest, and wondered if he weren't a fool to take such a chance. But there was no other choice.

He bent over the bed and whispered, "Eldon, don't make a sound."

Eldon's breathing caught and then steadied again. Ben repeated his words. This time the youth opened his eyes and stared at Ben.

"I'm taking you out of here," Ben whispered. "I'm going to carry you into the hills."

Still Eldon said nothing. Ben gathered the bedclothes around him and started to slip his hands beneath the youth. Then Eldon whispered, "My gun and belt are on top of that cabinet at the end of the room. We may need them."

Ben hesitated, then moved across the room. He found the gun rig and buckled it about his waist, outside his coat. It was awkward and heavy, but it gave him a certain sense of security, too.

Now he went back to the bed and lifted Eldon in his arms. The youth was light for a

man as big as Ben Swirl to carry, but the weight of both of them together put an unusual strain on the floor. It creaked noisily. There was nothing to do but go on, though, each step sounding to Ben like the ripping of a rusty nail out of an old board. On out the door he went with his burden, and headed for the gully up the side of the ravine. He had nearly reached the top when a shout came from the house. A match flared inside momentarily, and more shouts followed.

"That damn floor," Eldon said.

"We may be able to hide from them," Ben told him. "They won't know which way we went."

Eldon chuckled without mirth. "You *are* a greenhorn, Doc. Gratten could track an ant across solid rock. We haven't a chance."

But Ben kept on doggedly, not allowing himself to think of failure.

They had gone some distance when Eldon said, "Put me down, Doc, and get the hell out of here. You saved my life once. That's enough for any man."

They reached the horse that Ben had left in the rocks. If he could climb on the mount's back and carry Eldon in his arms, they might still make it away. Ben was considering this when Eldon spoke again.

"Too late, Doc," the youth said without hope. "Here they come."

Ben turned and saw several shadowy forms moving across the rocks some distance behind them. They would see his horse in a moment, he knew, and he moved away from it.

A group of rocks and mesquite offered some protection, and Ben hurried toward them. Behind the rocks there was a small level spot. Ben laid his burden there, then pulled the revolver from the holster and checked the load.

Eldon started to sit up but Ben held him down, saying, "Don't move. I didn't go to all this trouble just to have you hemorrhage."

Eldon relaxed, shaking his head. "You're a fool, Doc. Gratten will never let you out alive now. I didn't think he'd let you live this long after I heard about the fight you had with him."

A shout went up as one of the men sighted Ben's horse. They moved warily up to the animal. Then Gratten cursed. "It's that damn sawbones again," he howled. "If I get my hands on him he won't be fit to show his face in town."

Ben waited, watching. From behind him, Eldon whispered hoarsely, "Let fly a whistler, Doc, while you got the drop on 'em."

Ben ignored the suggestion. He waved a hand behind him to quiet the youth. He couldn't forget that his place was to heal, to save lives—it made no difference whose life it was. He would fight if absolutely necessary, but he would not shoot a man except in self-defense.

Gratten dropped to his hands and knees at the edge of the clearing where Ben's horse stood. He searched the ground for a few minutes, then grunted in satisfaction. He raised his eyes and looked directly at the brush and rocks behind which Ben was hiding.

"Come on out, Swirl," Gratten called. "You haven't a chance with that kid along to take care of. You wouldn't have a chance anyway."

WHEN Ben said nothing, Gratten motioned to the three men with him. They scattered from the clearing, moving in an arc, encircling Ben's position. Two of the men were on a hillside above Ben, one was downhill on the other side, and Gratten was in front. Gratten shouted, "We're coming in, Doc."

He moved forward, and Ben threw a shot over his head. The outlaw stopped momentarily, diving for cover. Ben turned and fired in the direction of the others.

"Somebody's going to get hurt," he called. "All I want is to take the boy out of here."

He quickly slipped more shells into the pistol and cocked it. Behind him, Eldon laughed aloud. He said, "You aren't going to scare them with that talk about getting hurt, Doc. Most of them are already carrying more lead in their guts than you have in that gun."

Gratten began to move forward again, more carefully this time. Ben felt hope slipping from him, but he fired again, the bullet whining from a rock near Gratten's head. This time Gratten returned the fire. Ben dropped behind a protective rock.

Gratten's shot was a signal, and the other

three men opened fire. Ben turned, firing up the slope and then down, rapidly. He was a good shot, having always enjoyed firearms, but this was a different game from any he had ever played. It was unpleasant to think that he might kill a man, yet he knew he had little choice.

Lead whined around the tiny clearing. Ben ran out of ammunition and had to reload. The others kept pouring lead at them. Ben had filled the last hole in the cylinder and was turning to fire when Eldon cried, "They're getting too dang close, Doc."

Ben turned and saw the boy's frightened eyes. There was a black hole in the light-colored blanket, showing where a slug had passed not an inch from Eldon's frail body. Ben dropped the gun in the dirt.

"You win, Gratten," he shouted.

The firing stopped and Gratten called, "Throw out your gun."

Ben picked it up and threw it over the rocks in front of him. It hit the flat side of a boulder and slid noisily to the ground. Gratten got to his feet and came toward them, the gun in his fist held steady, ready to fire.

The outlaw stopped a short distance from the rocks and said, "Come on out, Doc. And don't try anything or you're a dead man."

Ben lifted Eldon again and moved into the open, picking his way over the rocks. He stepped close to Gratten. The outlaw growled, "What's the matter with you, kid? Why didn't you holler when the doctor carried you out?"

Before Eldon could answer, Ben said, "I stuffed a rag in his mouth so he couldn't make a sound. I told him it'd kill him if he struggled."

Gratten went over to where Eldon's gun lay. He picked it up, studying it, then strode back to where Ben stood with the boy.

"So you just happened to find his gun on top of that cabinet."

Viciously, he slapped his open palm across Ben's face. "I ought to kill you both. Get going."

As Ben started back toward the house, he felt blood trickle from the corner of his mouth where his cheek had been cut against his teeth. Behind him one of the men was talking to Gratten in a low voice as they walked.

They reached the yard and Gratten said, "I'm going to keep you alive, Doc—for a couple of days. We might need you."

Ben said nothing. He headed for the front door of the house. "Not over there, Doc," Gratten said. "I've got a safer place for you."

At one side of the house a shed-like storeroom had been built, and Gratten steered Ben toward that. It was padlocked on the outside and had no windows. Gratten unlocked it and jerked open the door.

"Get in there, Doc," he ordered. "This ought to keep you from pulling any more shennanigans." His voice grew harder. "And just to make sure, one of the boys will camp right outside."

There was no alternative but to comply with Gratten's orders. It was dark and musty-smelling inside, so dark that Ben didn't see when Gratten slashed savagely at his head with the barrel of a gun. The last thing that Ben remembered for some time was trying to hold onto Eldon. He felt his knees give, and then all sense left him. . . .

Gratten chuckled as he closed the door and snapped the padlock closed on the hasp. He took the key and handed it to one of the men, saying, "You got yourself a job, Duke. Don't stir away from that door for a minute. That damn sawbones has done nothing but stir up trouble since he got here."

"But I thought I was gonna get to—"

"Shut up," Gratten snapped. "We'll take care of that mine payroll. The way our luck's been running lately, we might need the doctor before we're through."

He strode off, the other men following him. When he reached the front door of the house, he said, "Wake Sim and the rest of 'em. It'll be morning before long."

One of the men hurried off to do Gratten's bidding, as Gratten moved into the house, thinking. Swirl would be missed in town come morning, he knew, but by then it would be too late for anybody to do anything about it. They'd have the payroll off the train and be hightailing it back to the house. If any of the men needed Swirl, they'd get medical attention before they hauled out for good.

Then he'd get rid of Swirl and the kid—they both knew too much—and head for the

coast. He could have a high time there with the money he had cached away.

BEN came to his senses at the sound of running horses. He lay with his head resting on top of the boy. For some time he stared into the darkness, listening to the fading hoof beats. Then he raised his head, stifling a groan that rose to his lips. His arms were still under Eldon and, as he pulled them out, he listened for the boy's breathing. It came too fast and ragged.

He sat up and a pounding started in his head, dizzying him, making him nauseous. Faint, gray light traced the pattern of a rectangle around the door, and Ben realized that he had been unconscious for at least an hour. Reaching into the pocket of his coat, he found a match and struck it on the sole of his shoe.

The match sputtered noisily, smoldering and finally catching fire. It flared up and Ben hurriedly threw the blankets back over Eldon. The bandages were soaked with blood, the boy's face was white. Ben felt of the bandages, and it was some relief to find that they were drying. At least the bleeding had stopped.

Some time later Eldon's eyes fluttered and opened. As the day brightened, light filtered into the shed from many cracks so that Ben could see, although not very well.

"We're fixed just fine," Eldon said weakly. "They'll never let us out of here alive, Doc."

Ben bent over the boy to catch his words. He said, "They rode off somewhere. We may get out of here yet."

"Don't get your hopes up, Doc," Eldon said, his voice bitter. "They left a man named Duke on guard outside. I heard all that before I passed out."

"If we knew how long they'd be gone, we might be able to do something," Ben mused. "Although what it would be, I don't know."

Eldon closed his eyes. The talking had weakened him but he said, "I know where they're off to. Gratten's been planning it for months. They're going to take the mine payroll from the train."

Ben got to his feet and began to look about the shed. It was completely empty of anything that he might use as a weapon. The walls were sturdily built, and any noise would bring Duke on the run. For some time he stood in the middle of the small room, thinking. His eyes drifted to Eldon and then to the bandages around his chest.

The boy had fallen asleep, and Ben began to unwind the bandages gently until he had three or four feet of cloth in his hands. He ripped it off and tucked the loose end under, then twisted it ropelike.

Going to the door, he called, "Outside there."

For a worried minute he thought the guard had left them, and he repeated his call. Finally Duke answered in a surly tone, telling Ben to keep quiet.

"We need water. The boy's bleeding bad," Ben said.

He heard the rattle of gravel outside as the man got to his feet. He came closer to the door and said, "So let him die."

"Gratten won't like it. If he'd wanted the boy dead, he would have seen to it before he left."

Duke considered this for a moment, then grumbled, "All right, I'll get some."

"Bring it in a pan," Ben called after him.

Some time later Duke returned and Ben went to the door, standing to one side, the cloth rope held over his head. Duke took the lock off and let the door swing open under its own weight. He came in carrying the water in both hands.

The outlaw saw nothing, being blinded from the light outside, until Ben dropped the bandage over his head. Then he dropped the pan of water as Ben pulled the cloth tight around his neck. Within the minute, Duke was slumped unconscious at Ben's feet. Ben held the strangling rag as long as he dared, then eased off. Duke's pulse was still beating weakly when Ben felt it.

It took him only a few minutes to find rope in the barn. He tied Duke up and left him in the shed, then carried Eldon outside and around to the front porch. The wagon, a buckboard, stood at the hitch rail. A powerful looking dun stood in harness, and Ben guessed that Gratten intended to use the wagon for transportation when they left the ranch for good.

Carrying the mattress from Eldon's bed out to the wagon, he made a bed of sorts and laid the youth on it. Gratten had brought Ben's bag and tossed it into the shed. Now Ben put it in the wagon and climbed to the seat. They left the yard at a crawl.

It was a long, hot ride, and Ben felt sorry for the boy, who had to lie suffering in the sun. He took his coat and draped it over the back of the seat, making a shield for Eldon's face. The youth lapsed into unconsciousness for a time, and when he came to he was delirious.

There was no road to follow, so Ben chose the levelest ground he could find. He wanted to tend the raving boy in the wagon, but knew there was nothing he could do if he did stop.

After driving in a southwesterly direction, he hit the road west of Cibola, increasing speed as he drove on the relatively smooth roadbed. There was only one place for Eldon, and that was with Lucy. Ben headed toward the Carstair's.

Lucy came from the house on the run when Ben drove into the yard. As he reined in before the house he realized just how weary he was. Lucy looked so fresh and cool coming toward him in a bright gingham dress that he wished he could take her in his arms. He thought that it would be as refreshing as sleep to do so.

She stopped beside the wagon, her forehead creased in worry. "I just came from town," she said. "Sheriff Knight asked me if I had seen you. He thought that something had happened."

HE SWUNG down from the seat of the wagon and faced her. "Something did happen," he told her.

Eldon groaned just then and, for the first time, Lucy saw her brother lying in the wagon. "Eldon," she cried, going to the side of the wagon. The boy turned his head and said something incoherent.

Ben lifted him out of the wagon and headed for the house. "He's had a rough time of it, Lucy. I hope he'll find a welcome here."

"He's my brother, isn't he?" she cried, forgetting in her anxiety how she had spoken of him in the past.

Ben laid Eldon on the couch in the living room and began to cut the bandages off with scissors that Lucy brought. The wound was an ugly purplish color and Lucy gasped at the sight of it, then turned away. She went silently when Ben said, "Water."

He cleaned the wound with the water and bandaged it again with strips of clean sheets that Lucy tore up for him. Eldon, feverish and flushed, moaned through the whole operation. Ben showed Lucy how to bathe the youth's face in cool water to keep his temperature down.

"Keep him from moving about," he told her, "and keep bathing his face with cool water."

On her knees beside her brother, Lucy nodded and smiled wanly up at Ben. "I didn't really mean all those things I said about him," she stammered. "Nor about you, either."

"If he comes around before I get back, tell him those things, Lucy," Ben said softly. "Tell him he's welcome. That will help him get well faster than anything I can do."

She got to her feet and moved close to him. "Thank you, Doctor—Ben," she said. "I'm sorry about the way I acted."

He took her hands and said, "I'd have felt the same way you did if things had been reversed. That's all past now, anyway."

She tilted her head and he kissed her lightly, hurriedly. Drawing away from her with an effort, he told her, "I've got to get into town. Gratten is going after the mine payroll, if he doesn't already have it."

She followed him to the door, detaining him for just a moment more to say, "Be careful, Ben. Go see Sheriff Knight and then come back here. Eldon needs your care." She smiled up at him. "And so do I."

He climbed onto the seat of the buckboard and whipped the horse into motion, cutting a tight circle and heading back toward Cibola. There was a fifty-fifty chance of the boy's pulling through, he thought, as he drove rapidly toward town.

If Eldon came to his senses long enough to understand that Lucy wanted him back, then his chances of living would be vastly improved. If Eldon died, there wasn't much chance of Ben's staying on in Cibola. He wasn't even

sure that he would want to continue on as a doctor, anyway, if that happened.

Lucy had come to mean a great deal to him in the short space of time he had known her, and now he knew that she had some feeling for him, too. And that, also, would be killed if Eldon died. So much depended on the boy's living, yet Ben's job as a doctor was done. Time would decide it for them all.

He rounded a ridge and came in sight of Cibola. The streets were crowded so that it looked like fiesta time. But as Ben drew closer he saw there was no festive air about the town. Sullen, drawn faces regarded him with hostility as he drove in. In the middle of the street was a group of mounted men, their horses stirring restlessly until a great cloud of dust had been raised.

Somebody in the crowd shouted, "Here's the sawbones, Sheriff."

The group parted and Knight rode through the opening on the back of a big blue roan. His face was pulled in a scowl as he regarded Ben, his anger poorly concealed.

"What are you trying to pull, Doc?" he growled. "Mighty damn funny how you disappear in the night and then ride into town right after Gratten and his bunch run off with the mine payroll."

Ben looked around him at the silent, inscrutible faces, knowing that he wouldn't be believed no matter what he said. "They got away with it, then?"

A murmur of anger swept through the crowd at Ben's words and Knight said, "You admit that you knew about it?"

Ben nodded, wondering if he shouldn't have kept his mouth shut. But it was too late to back out now. He said, "I came to take you to the hideout."

"You're a big help, Doc," Knight told him. "It's too late for that now. Two guards were killed and two wounded. You could have prevented that."

"The wounded men—I'd better take a look at them," Ben said, getting impatient with the talk that led nowhere.

Knight didn't answer, and the crowd was silent, ugly. Ben looked around at the faces. They'd never let him look at the wounded men, because to them he was little more than a butcher. His temper flared at his helpless position and yet he understood the feeling about him.

"Listen," he said to Knight. "There was a wounded man at Gratten's. To move him would have been fatal. I couldn't tell you where the hideout was until the man was out of danger. Can't you see that?"

"I saw two dead guards on the train this morning," Knight shot back at him. "Are you trying to tell me that two of their lives were worth one outlaw's life?"

"I had a patient, Knight, and I had to save him," Ben said levelly. "I had no way of knowing what would happen in the future."

Knight's thin face was flushed with anger and his mount moved restlessly under him. His words came out harshly. "I tried to tell you what would happen, but you wouldn't listen. As far as I'm concerned you're as guilty as Gratten. Now get out of Cibola and stay out. If I'd had any sense I would have run you out that first night."

The sheriff reined around and rode stiffly away, entering the crowd. They followed him down the street and Ben stared after them as they moved slowly away. It's like I'm something evil, he thought as he watched them. The street was quiet, deserted around him now as he sat in the seat of the buckboard.

WHY not leave? There was nothing left here for him. The men of Cibola would never let him practice. There would be a train East in a few hours. He could pack up and be on it. In Boston he could set up practice and be respected.

But, somehow, that was running out. There was time enough to leave when he had proven himself. He could go then with his head high, and there would be nothing to haunt him the rest of his life. He thought suddenly of the two railroad guards that had been wounded, and he whipped the buckboard into motion.

The stable in Cibola was operated by an old man named Judson. Stove-up from too many battles with the broncs, Judson hobbled about the stable, a quiet, taciturn man. Ben drove into the doorway of the barn and stopped. Judson spit tobacco juice, eyeing Ben warily.

Ben nodded and asked, "Where did they take the wounded railroad guards, Judson?"

The old man chewed, absently scratching his side, and said nothing. Ben spoke again, louder this time. "I asked you a question."

Judson spat again and drawled, "Somebody told me that Knight advised you to sashay right out of town."

Ben jumped from the seat of the wagon and grabbed the front of Judson's dirty vest. "You'll tell me where those men are if you know what's good for you."

Judson looked into Ben's blazing eyes and said, "They're out at the Widow Bland's. That's where the spur branches off the main line to go up to the mines. They were held up there as the train was switching."

Ben dropped his hold, and Judson backed up a step. There was a smile of bitter triumph on his face when he said, "But they aren't gonna let you see them, after what you did."

Ben looked around the stable. Near the doorway, leaning stock down against the wall, was a rifle. He got it and climbed back into the buckboard. "They'll let me see them," he said grimly.

The posse had left the town by the time Ben sent the buckboard in a run down the main street of Cibola. Far down the road ahead of him he saw their dust as they headed toward the holdup spot to begin trailing the outlaws.

He followed behind them, careful not to get too close, knowing that would ruin his chances of helping the two guards. The men of Cibola didn't realize that in their anger at Ben they were possibly cutting off the two wounded men from help they needed. All Cibola understood was that an Easterner, a foreigner, had come into town, bringing trouble and death with him. The fact that he was a doctor made it seem all the worse to them.

The posse reined in before a small house near the tracks. Somebody dismounted and ran inside. A moment later he came out again, and the posse rode off up the spur. Ben saw all this from a distance. When the posse had gone, he drove the wagon up to the house.

At the sound of it, Luke Tally came to the doorway. There was no friendliness on his face as he stared at Ben. "What do you want?" he asked in a surly tone.

"I want to see those two men," Ben told him flatly, tired of talk, of anger, of suspicion. "And I don't want any argument."

"Get out, Swirl."

Ben lifted the rifle from the seat beside him and pointed it at Tally. He climbed from the wagon, reaching in back for his bag. When he had it, he moved toward the house.

"It's not your place to deprive those men of any help I can give them," Ben said when he reached the door.

The mayor of Cibola moved slowly, grudgingly, out of the doorway and Ben entered, leaning the rifle against the wall just inside the door. Tally indicated a room at the back of the house with a wave of his hand, and Ben moved on.

The Widow Bland was fluttering over the two men. She was a large woman of ample proportions. Middle-aged, living in the past, she had refused to move from the house near the railroad. Her husband had been a railroad man till he was killed in a wreck.

An outspoken woman, she turned to look at Ben. She said, "You must be that doctor I heard all the men cussing."

Ben smiled grimly and said, "That sounds like me, all right."

He moved to the bed. It was a double width and both men were lying on it. One of the guards followed Ben with his eyes; the other lay whitefaced, his eyes closed. Ben went to work.

Some time later he looked up, his job finished. Tally stood in the doorway, the Widow Bland rested in a chair from her exertion of carrying hot water to the bedroom.

Tally's eyes were a little softer than they had been before. He said, "You looked like you knew what you were doing."

"Thanks," Ben said drily. "Neither one was hurt bad, but it could have gotten worse if the bullets had been left there."

He dropped his instruments into his bag and went into the living room. Coffee was brewing in the kitchen and he headed in that direction. Tally followed.

"Knight told me he warned you to get out of town," Tally said, as Ben poured himself a cup of the hot, black liquid.

Ben nodded and said, "He did."

"I'm not sure now that he was right, Ben, but he's a bad one to cross."

"I've got another patient, Tally," Ben said, sipping at the coffee. "I won't think about leaving until he's out of danger."

Tally frowned. "Who's that?"

Ben hesitated a moment, then said, "Eldon Carstair. I took him out to the ranch."

"Eldon?" Tally exclaimed in amazement. "Where did you run across him? I thought he'd left the country."

BEN finished the coffee and put the cup on the drainboard. It had taken a little of the weariness from him and he felt better able to ride. He said, "You'll find out, anyway, so I might as well tell you. He was with Gratten. He was the one that Knight shot during the bank holdup."

"That damn kid," Tally said. "I told him more'n once that—"

Ben went into the living room and picked up his bag. "He's just that, Tally—a kid. Everybody makes mistakes. He just happened to make one a little worse than most."

"Knight'll be glad to hear about this," Tally said bitterly. "He vowed to clean out every man in Gratten's bunch. Eldon Carstair will be just another outlaw to him."

Ben saw his mistake. He hadn't realized the depth of feeling that the men of Cibola had about the outlaw gang. It just now had occurred to him that men had lost their life savings, money that meant food to their families, through the action of Gratten and his men. Revenge would be sweet to the people of Cibola.

He went out to the buckboard and climbed onto the seat again. He steered the horse around and headed back toward town, thinking of Lucy and Eldon. And, thinking of the boy, another thought came to him. He whipped his horse into a run.

Knight would never catch Gratten at the hideout. By the time the posse had followed their trail that far, Gratten would have left, heading in just one direction—after Eldon. The boy knew too much, probably knew where Gratten intended going after the holdup. If anybody in the gang talked on the witness stand, Gratten wouldn't have a chance—and Eldon was the only one likely to talk. Without slowing, Ben raced through town. As he tore by the stable he saw Judson watching him, his perpetual chewing stopped for once.

Back at the Widow Bland's, Tally chewed on his lip, thinking. His thinking paralleled Ben's to a certain extent. He didn't figure that Knight would catch up with Gratten by trailing him. It would be slow work following the outlaws in that rocky country, and Gratten wouldn't waste any time getting out of the vicinity. But one man would know where Gratten was heading, and that man was Eldon Carstair.

Tally left the house on the run. If he could get to Knight and talk him into wringing the truth out of the boy, they might catch Gratten before he had a chance to disappear into the wilderness. His horse was already saddled and waiting where he had left it earlier that day. Swinging into the saddle, he headed up the spur in the posse's footsteps.

Ben didn't see the five horsemen until he had raced past the gully in which they were hiding. The riders took after him with a shout. He glanced back over his shoulder and recognized Gratten, Sim and three others of the gang. As he watched, Gratten drew his pistol and fired at him.

Ben turned back to watch the road, hunching over to make himself as small as possible. He heard more gunshots but didn't turn to look. Twice lead ripped into the wagon. Then he hit a winding part of the road, getting some cover from ridges that came between him and his pursuers.

The rifle was on the seat beside him, but he had no chance of using it as the buckboard swung crazily down the road. A sharp curve loomed ahead, the last curve before reaching the Carstair's. The horse, mane flying straight out behind, took the curve, but the wagon's wheels couldn't find purchase and it swung wildly, dropping off a near vertical cliff.

Ben grabbed the rifle and jumped as they went over. He hit and rolled, the rifle tearing from his grasp. Halfway to the bottom he stopped, stunned, against a boulder. The rifle followed him down in a small landslide that

he had started by his descent. He grabbed it and got to his feet, then ran toward the bottom of the hill through the loose gravel, traveling in great, leaping strides.

Before he reached the protection of brush and rocks, Gratten and the other four began to fire down at him from the road, their slugs kicking up dirt around him.

He dove for cover behind rocks and looked up at the road. The five outlaws stared down at him, guns in hand. He fired the rifle up at them and they disappeared from the rim of the hill. He got up and ran down the wash, glancing up toward the road as he went. When Gratten again came to the edge and looked over, Ben dodged behind a clump of brush. Gratten saw him and moved along the road.

They sent a hail of lead down at him. The arm of his coat gave a tug and when he looked he saw a neat round hole cut by the bullet. Again he sent lead up the hill, aiming to kill now but missing the difficult shot.

Brush and pinion gave him cover as he sprinted down the wash again. When Gratten and the others fired next, they were only guessing at Ben's position, for the growth hid him from the road.

Carstair's lay over a low hill behind Ben. The road followed the contours of the country, curving in a wide arc so that it was nearly twice as far to the ranch by the road.

Gratten would guess at Ben's intention before long, Ben figured. He'd have to make a break over the hill where he'd be in plain sight of their guns. But it was the only way he had a chance of protecting Eldon and Lucy from Gratten's fury.

He moved carefully then, keeping out of sight, crawling closer until it was imperative that he reveal himself. Then, sending one more shot up the hill at the outlaws, he broke for the crest of the hill. Gratten gave a shout and fired at him. Then Ben looked back and saw the outlaws breaking for their horses. They swung aboard and headed at a dead run down the road.

Ben reached the top of the hill. Across a ravine lay Carstair's ranch. But Ben's heart sank when he looked at the deeply-eroded dry wash.

STEEP-SIDED and deep, it presented a barrier that would take some time to cross, time that he didn't have. He ran down the hillside to the lip of the ravine, then moved alongside it, looking for a place to descend. A narrow wash cut into the ravine like a hanging valley, leaving a ten-foot drop. Ben clambered to the edge and pushed off.

He dropped limply at the bottom, then scrambled to his feet. The opposite side was a near-vertical wall of limestone. Almost frantic now in his worry over Lucy and Eldon, he ran down the wash looking for anything that could serve as a handhold.

He found a place where a block of limestone had dropped out of the wall. With an effort he climbed up onto the tiny shelf and found that he could just reach a ledge above him. The rifle made climbing almost impossible. He took it in both hands and tried to flip it onto the ledge above him. He missed and it dropped past him into the ravine. He looked once at it, then clambered on up the side of the wash.

Unarmed now, he moved through the brush toward the house, as Gratten and the others pounded down the road toward him. A hundred feet of open ground still lay between him and the house. He sprinted for it. The outlaw guns broke into a staccato roar. Halfway across the space, stinging lead bit at his thigh. He lost his stride, then picked it up again and went diving into the house.

Lucy stared at him from a position beside Eldon's sick bed. White-faced and with her eyes wide, she cried, "Ben, what is it?"

He scrambled to his feet and ran for the back bedroom, remembering having seen a rifle in one corner of the room. He grabbed it up, along with a box of shells that lay on the floor beside it. It was a single shot Winchester, but just then he was thankful for any small favor.

He ran back into the living room to a window and peered out. He had forgotten about his wound until Lucy exclaimed, "Your leg! They shot you!"

He reach down and felt of the wound. A shallow furrow throbbed under his touch and he said, "It just grazed me, Lucy. I must be living right. How's Eldon?"

Worry was strong in her voice as she told him, "He's no better, Ben. He's been out of his head most of the time."

Ben nodded and shoved the rifle through the open window. The outlaws had scattered through the brush that ringed the house. Ben fired at movement in the brush, and then quickly reloaded.

"Eldon hasn't reached the crisis yet, Lucy," he told her without turning. "His fever will go on up. When it drops again, we'll know one way or the other." He nodded out the window. "Gratten doesn't want the sheriff to get hold of Eldon because the boy knows enough to hang him."

He sent another shot driving across the clearing and heard somebody curse angrily. Then one of the men broke into the open, running toward the cover of some trees at the side of the house. Ben slipped another shell into the chamber and fired. The outlaw staggered for several steps and fell in a limp heap.

"I killed him," Ben muttered involuntarily, the words slipping out, prompted by a deep distaste for what he had done.

Gratten's men moved more carefully then, sliding around the house under cover of rocks and brush. Ben began to move around to the other windows in the house, throwing shots more as a warning than in the hope of hitting one of the men.

When he came back into the front room of the house Lucy looked up at him. She asked, "Is there much chance, Ben?"

He looked down at her, full of a sudden compassion for her, for what she had been through. This wild country raised brave women, he decided. He shook his head, knowing that there was no use trying to lie to her.

"If help doesn't come from somewhere soon, Gratten will have his way," he told her. "He knows he can't stay here forever without being found out. Knight's on his trail, but I don't know how far behind he is."

Lucy dipped a rag in the pan of water, wrung it out, and laid it across the boy's hot forehead. She got to her feet, following Ben to one of the windows. Gratten opened fire then, having caught sight of Ben peering out.

Lead smashed into the walls of the house. Ben grabbed Lucy and pulled her down out of the way. They crouched under the window, close together, staring into each other's eyes.

"I—I feel this is my fault," Lucy stammered. "If I hadn't talked about you in town after grandfather died, things would have turned out differently."

Ben smiled into her worried face and said, "They wouldn't have trusted me, anyway. Your grandfather's dying was just an excuse. I've found out that in wild country like this a man has to prove himself before he's accepted."

"But—"

"I think I'm right, Lucy," he interrupted. "When I first arrived here I thought this was a crude country filled with crude people. Can you wonder that nobody trusted me? The East and West are different, but one is not better than the other."

The firing stopped outside and, in the silence that followed, Lucy leaned forward and kissed him. Then she said softly, "You've proven yourself, Ben. You've risked your life to save the life of a boy."

"Eldon is an outlaw in the eyes of the town," Ben said, shaking his head. "They won't thank me for that. You should have seen Tally when I told him about it."

"But what do they want?"

Ben touched her arm and lifted his head to look out the window. The clearing was empty. He said wryly, "I don't think anything I could do would make any difference now. I don't blame the people of Cibola, though."

Eldon groaned then and Lucy moved back across the room to him. She began to bathe his face with the cool water again.

Several times Gratten's men exposed themselves as they moved to encircle the house. But the exposure was so brief that Ben never had a chance to get off a telling shot. He moved about the room, firing from the windows more from guesswork than from anything he saw.

GRATTEN would close in on the house as soon as he had it surrounded, Ben knew. The outlaw couldn't afford to waste any more time. And he would not only kill Eldon but himself and Lucy, too.

He moved to the back bedroom, studying the terrain from there. Silence hung over the clearing, heavy, threatening. Lucy's scream came to him, stabbing him into action. He leaped for the door of the bedroom in time to see Sim shoving his way through the front door. The outlaw saw Ben at the same time, But Ben was faster. He fired the rifle from his hip and the heavy slug caught Sim in the chest, knocking him backward onto the porch.

Lucy, white and shaken, got to her feet and went into the kitchen. She returned carrying a pistol. She said, "We may need this, Ben."

He took it from her, feeling a vast respect for her bravery in this tight situation. Their eyes met for a moment and the last small barrier between them crumbled. With a small cry she ran the few steps between them and he enfolded her in his arms. He kissed her, forgetting for a brief moment the danger that surrounded them.

Suddenly she was more precious to him than anything ever had been before. They broke apart and he said, leading her across the room, "There's a closet in the bedroom. You must hide in there, Lucy."

"No, Ben," she said calmly, firmly. "You said once that Eldon's downfall was partly my fault. I won't run out on him again."

Ben started to protest, but Lucy disengaged herself from his grasp and returned to the couch where the boy lay. They came all at once, then. Through the two front room windows Ben saw the outlaws approaching, running in a twisting motion. He fired from the center of the room, using the pistol that Lucy had brought him. He missed, then turned and fired out the other direction. Again he missed.

A thumping at the back of the house told him that one of the men was mounting the back porch steps. He ran to the doorway into the kitchen and fired at the first sign of movement. The man gave a cry and tumbled down the steps. Turning back to the front room, he saw somebody—it looked like Gratten—race past one of the windows.

He waited tensely. Gratten appeared at the door, firing as he came. Lead thunked into the wall beside Ben. Then he squeezed off his shot. Gratten grunted, and stood as if paralyzed for a moment in the center of the doorway. Then he stepped back onto the porch, dropped the pistol in his hand to grab at the ever-widening circle of red spreading across the front of his shirt. He staggered against the side of the house, then slumped to the floor of the porch.

Outside, somebody shouted, "Gratten got it."

A short, angry fusillade of shots rained against the side of the house and then all was silence. And in the silence Ben heard the sound of approaching horses.

Knight and his men rode into the yard. The two remaining men of Gratten's gang made a break for their horses, but the angry posse didn't let them get halfway across the clearing. There was one terrible roar of guns as the men cut loose, and the two outlaws dropped to the ground, dead before they hit.

Ben went to the porch. From inside he had seen Gratten's feet move, and realized that he had not killed the outlaw. He shoved the pistol under his belt. As he reached the doorway, one of the men in the posse shouted, "Get out of the way, Doc. That skunk's still alive."

Hard-eyed and vengeful, the men turned, bringing their guns around. Ben hesitated only a moment in the face of the guns, then he went on through the door, dropping to his knees beside the outlaw.

Knight's voice knifed across the clearing. "Get out of there, Doc, unless you want to get it, too."

Ben turned to look at the group, dumbfounded at the sheriff's statement. Knight's eyes were glazed with excitement, as were the eyes of the other men in the posse. Reason had fled them during the chase. There was only one thought in the mind of the men now—justice, crude though it might be.

Ben drew the pistol from his belt and said, "Kill me then. This man needs my aid. I put the bullet in him, and I intend to take it out."

Gratten groaned and rolled weakly from side to side in pain. Ben turned to his patient and ripped his shirt open, not knowing if a volley of lead would end both their lives.

Lucy came to the door then and Ben said quietly, "Bring me the sharpest knife in the house, some wire, and bandages."

She nodded and disappeared from the doorway. It would be a crude operation because he had lost his instruments when the wagon went off the road. He put the pistol on the porch beside him in plain sight of the men in the posse. They stared at him angrily, but some tiny invisible thread held them in check.

Lucy brought the things he had asked for and Ben went to work, probing for the bullet. As he worked he realized that this would probably be his last act as a doctor in Cibola.

But something else came before acceptance. It would be a greater crime if he didn't use the knowledge and skill that was his, even though his patient was an outlaw, a murderer.

He worked, and an iron determination grew in him. Let them run him out of Cibola. He wouldn't give up his practice, nor would he leave the West. The country needed doctors and someway, somewhere he would find a place for himself.

He lost all track of time as he worked, seeing only the wounded man before him. Gratten had long since ceased to move, but his heart beat on and his chest rose and fell slightly with his breathing.

BEN found the bullet with the wire he had used for a probe. Now he withdrew it and bent a hook on the end. With this he carefully found the bullet again and worked it out of Gratten's chest. He didn't look up from his task until the bullet lay on the porch floor. Then he saw Lucy standing behind him, the rifle in her hands. It was trained on the posse.

Ben smiled grimly up at her and set to bandaging Gratten's wound. Lucy said, "Eldon came out of it, Ben. He spoke to me when I went to get the bandages. I think he'll be all right. I told him I needed him here."

Ben nodded, intent on his job. Lucy would need somebody to help her at the ranch. Eldon would, in all probability, be let off with a light sentence or none at all, in view of his small part in the outlaw gang's activities.

Knight's voice came then, across the space that separated them. He said, "You can put down the gun, Miss Carstair."

Ben looked up at Knight as he finished his job on Gratten. Knight had dismounted and was coming toward the house.

"Put it down, Lucy," Ben told her, and she let the muzzle drop until it was pointing at the ground.

Knight stopped at the foot of the steps leading up to the porch. He looked a bit sheepish as he said, "We held a powwow while you were doing your stuff on Gratten, Doc. I reckon we were all a little bull-headed about you." He shook his head. "I reckon any man as crazy about his duty as you are is good enough for us. When I saw you treat the man that just tried to kill you, and face down an angry posse to do it, I decided I'd trust my life with you any day in the week."

Knight mounted the steps and shoved out his hand. Ben took it and said simply, "I was hoping I could be Cibola's doctor."

Knight turned to Lucy. "I'm not the judge, mind you, Miss Carstair, but I think I'm safe in saying that your brother won't find things going too hard with him, if he cooperates with the law."

"He'll do that, Sheriff," Lucy said happily.

She turned to Ben, and he saw that she was searching for words. But what was there to say? He took her in his arms, forgetting the men about them, and kissed her.

Knight cleared his throat and said with a grin, "I told you once before that you weren't one to waste time, Doc. And I'll say it again."

Ben turned to the sheriff. "Things move fast in this country, Sheriff. I've got to learn to move with them."

He turned to Lucy and kissed her again without wasting any more words—or time.

NO, I'M not giving you fighting wages," Tom Esau was bawling from inside the bunkhouse. "I expect you to handle whatever comes from riding for me. If I've got to buy your guns, I don't want 'em."

In spite of a worried mind, Joe Tamblin smothered a grin as he swung down from his horse and moved stiffly toward the bunkhouse. Plain as the heard voice, he could imagine Esau's big thick neck thrown back, the better to bellow. With his yellow-red hair, Esau would've made a good Viking.

He was somewhat out of place in a democracy; but then the Cross Rivers country wasn't democratic, no matter what Hod Timmons and Rutledge and the homesteaders thought.

Squaring his shoulders, Joe eased in through the door. Esau spun around, glaring. When he saw who it was, he grinned.

"Well, Joe, how was town?"

There was no soft way of saying what Joe had been thinking on his ride from Dutch's Ford. Now, looking squarely at the big man who had stood by his friend and helped him get his own start at raising cattle, Joe said, "Tom, if you build that dam, those homesteaders will start a war. They've got to have water."

"I didn't think they'd send me a posy," Esau said scornfully.

Joe's heart thudded. "Tom, I think you ought to talk to Timmons and Rutledge."

"What are you worried about?" Esau demanded. "Your range is right below mine. You'll get all the water you need."

Sure, Esau took care of his friends. But those dozen families coming west, settling hopefully in Cross Rivers Valley—

With an effort of will, Joe said carefully, "I'm not the only guy beneath your dam, Tom. Whether you like it or not, they're here, and if you run them out, more'll come."

Esau stared. "I'll be damned," he roared, gray eyes catching fire.

SHADOW OF

Esau swung her up just as the explosion caught them

THE PLOW

By JEANNE WILLIAMS

JOE WAS CAUGHT in the middle . . . torn between his loyalty to Esau and his love for a nester girl fighting for her land

"I never figured on a boy I raised being scared of some hoehandlers."

"If a bunch of them came after me with a rope," Joe said, "I'd be plenty scared. But that's not the idea. You're just bulling into this dam-building, when you could straighten it out with a little talk. These folks aren't no-account trash—Rutledge owned a good piece of Virginia before the war, and Timmons was a doctor. They just couldn't take Reconstruction."

"Let's get out of here," Esau interrupted, casting a disgusted glare at his cowboys. "These shorthorns are already hollering for fighting wages, when all I ask them to do is herd cows. If I need gunslicks, I'll hire real ones." Spinning around, he took Joe through the door, heading for the corrals.

Wondering what was up, Joe stretched his long legs to keep up. Esau moved with short, gusty steps, his boot heels kicking up white dust.

At the corral he stopped and wheeled on Joe. The blond man's long shadow fell black and solid across the ground.

"Look," said Esau, pointing down at it. "I step out in the sun and I throw a big shadow. I like that, Joe; I fought for the space it covers. But—" and he brought his fist down into the other broad hand—"my shadow will never fall on plowed land."

There was no use pointing out to Esau that with a little care he could live his life out without standing on a farmed acre. To Esau's mind, his shadow covered Cross Rivers Valley; he was no man to be bound by factual, physical limits. The problem was clear to Esau. But to Joe, roped between loyalty to this man who was almost a foster-father, and his feeling that the dam would be pure murder, it was thick and dangerous as quicksand.

"Tom, I know you came here when the Indians held their Sun Dance by the river. I know you stayed when most men ran. But there's lots of land, and Rutledge and the others have had a hard time, too."

"I'll send 'em a box of handkerchiefs to cry in."

Joe stared. He had expected this; but he'd hoped, crazily, that Esau might be reasonable. Turning away, Joe curbed his anger, speaking without expression.

"Guess I'll get on home."

"Wait." Esau was beside him in a stride. "Joe, if things hadn't gotten uncomfortable for your good Southern friends, do you think they'd have come out here? You bet they wouldn't. They'd still be sitting free and comfy on those green Virginia slopes."

"You don't give them credit for trying to start fresh."

"Why should I?" Esau asked. A slow grin spread the wide corners of his mouth. "Why, son, you've heard that song: 'What you gonna do when the well runs dry?' I got the answer: 'Sit on the bank and watch the crawdads die.' Every damned one of those grubbing farmers! You just tell 'em that, Joe."

"They won't scare," Joe said.

Narrowing his eyes, Esau shrugged. "I'm not trying to scare them. I'm putting in a dam. Why're you worried, Joe? It couldn't be on account of that black-haired gal of Rutledge's, could it?"

Joe felt his ears turning red. "I've only met Miss Susan once," he growled, climbing into his saddle.

Esau chuckled, hanging onto his joke. "Tell you what, I'll send her enough water to keep her geraniums blooming till she decides to marry you."

FOR a middle-aged man whose fiery young wife hated him, Esau could sure be reckless when talking about love. Thinking of Concepción, who moved with the pride and bitter beauty of a small wind, Joe's face grew hotter and his words were a buzz in his ears.

"Don't go to the trouble. Be seeing you."

Wheeling his horse, Joe would have ridden, but Esau, eyes troubled suddenly, put his hand up, catching the headstall. "Joe, don't let my tongue rough you up. It was in fun."

Joe looked down, feeling helpless with this man whom he could no longer side with but couldn't hate, either. He rubbed his hand across his chin, before, reluctantly, he grinned.

"Skip it, Tom."

Esau flexed his hand on the horse's neck. "You won't stay to supper?"

Joe thought of Concepción. "No," he said. "Thanks."

Esau stepped back, and Joe rode out, pulling his hat down against the late sun.

It was easier, Joe decided, to be Esau's enemy than his friend. You might not live so long, but your path was clear. But the catch was that, ten years ago, an eleven-year-old kid and his trapper father had been caught in a spring blizzard and Esau, out seeing how many cows he'd lost, had found them in a drift. The father had died.

Joe lived, though, and Esau had given him a home, raised him to take over the Sawed E Ranch. In all the world, Esau had no friend. Maybe that was why he gave the force of his nature, his courage and wry laughter, to making Joe love him, place him higher than any man should be placed.

And I did, Joe thought, riding up to his own log cabin. He knew he still did, though the boy's worship had been honed by the flint of experience and resentment.

The men Esau killed, the way he bought sheriffs to run Dutch's Ford—those things Joe heard of dimly and cast aside. What shape did a whisper take beside the splendid strength and joking comradeship of Tom Esau? But then, two years ago, Esau came back from a trip to Juarez, and he brought with him something that Joe couldn't ignore—Concepción.

Joe's mouth grew dry just thinking of her. She had been about sixteen then, three years younger than his own nineteen, and she had stood like a carved madonna against the big oak door that night Esau brought her home.

"This is my wife," he'd said, to Joe's astonishment.

The slight tremble of her red lips had stopped, while her eyes flashed black fire. "You are a liar," she had said, and walked past the two men as if she owned the house and they were badly trained servants.

Joe still remembered, with a creeping at the back of his neck, how Esau had laughed with admiring joy. "You'd never know she'd been in a raider's camp for two days when I found her, would you?" he asked. Shaking his head as if amazed at himself, he added, "I bought the girl, like you'd buy a horse. But, so help me, I married her! And she still shows her teeth and calls me a 'blond beast.' " His mood changing, Esau grinned. "Wonder what she'll call our kids," he'd said, and followed her.

But there had been no children. No love, either, though Concepción no longer insulted Esau. Joe had learned gradually that her people, *hacendados* of north Mexico, had been killed in the raid in which she was captured. Maybe her hatred of the raiders had been switched over to Esau. However that was, she gave the big golden man, her husband, nothing. He took, she hated.

And Joe, under their roof, had been able to stand her nearness no longer. That was why he had lived in his own cabin for almost a year. Esau thought Joe's reason for leaving Sawed E was the natural urge to start a place of his own, and Joe had let him think that.

The cabin, built long and tight, was dusky, lonesome. Standing in front of the cold fireplace, Joe suddenly felt he couldn't stand the evening there, thinking. It was too easy to think of Concepción and what might happen if Esau fought with the farmers.

Violently pushing the thought back, Joe went out and cared for his horse. It had covered a lot of ground that day. Since it was fifteen miles to Dutch's Ford, Joe decided not to go. After a supper of cold mush and side meat and coffee, he saddled his other horse, a bay mare, and rode for town.

HE HAD no clear aim but to keep from thinking, and so—though he had originally headed for the saloon—when he saw the lights yellowing the windows of the square frame church and heard singing from there, he reined up the mare and pondered about going in. A long time ago, before his mother died and he started making the trapping trips with his father, he had used to go to church, all slicked and washed up.

While he was trying to decide, the singing stopped, there came a buzz of voices, and then the wide door opened and people sort of melted down the steps, talking, laughing, and shaking hands on their way. Joe lifted the reins and would've moved on, but Charles Rutledge's voice came over the others.

"Tamblin! Wait, sir." Joe pulled up.

The lanky Virginian came through the crowd, his daughter on his arm. Joe took off his hat, bowing as best he could while mounted.

"Evening, Mr. Rutledge. Good evening, Miss Susan."

She smiled. Rutledge cleared his throat, a habit he'd probably acquired in the Virginia

legislature. "Mr. Tamblin, won't you ride along by our carriage and have some light refreshment at our home? I'd like to extend our acquaintance."

Joe swallowed. If he went, Esau and the other ranchmen would think he was conniving with the farmers. But he couldn't turn down the Rutledges here in public.

"We're neighbors," he said, managing a grin. "Might as well be friends."

Susan's laugh tinkled. Her father's keen gaze raked Joe before he gave an abrupt nod. "I wish, sir, that more of the cattlemen here were of that opinion. Perhaps a peaceful discussion—oh, well, let's be on our way, young man."

Mrs. Rutledge, an invalid, whose vivid blue eyes were like Susan's, acknowledged her husband's introduction of Joe with a smile and a nod. She sat in a big chair with her useless legs covered by a knit shawl that swept to the floor. As Joe sat down facing her, he thought how hard the trip West must have been for this older woman who hadn't even the strength of a well body from which to draw courage.

Under the circumstances, there wasn't much use telling her how welcome the Rutledges were to Cross Rivers; and any asking about her health seemed brutal. Joe sat helplessly fingering his hat. After a minute, Mrs. Rutledge laughed mischievously.

"You look ready to run, Mr. Tamblin. Is there that much ill will between your people and ours?"

Joe looked at her. Behind the gentle smile, he saw a fortitude that demanded the truth. "I'm afraid there is, ma'am." He made a swift, flinging motion with his hand. "There's as much bad blood as there was between the Union and the Confederacy. The cattlemen figure that when the land is plowed and fences are put in, that's the end of them and their open range."

Charles Rutledge had joined them. Now, sitting forward with his elbows fixed on his knees, he asked directly, "The way I hear it, it's not so much the cattlemen as it is Tom Esau. How about that?"

Rutledge was an out-with-it person. He'd been in the general store with Susan when Joe had happened in a week before, and Rutledge had come right over and introduced himself, saying he wanted to know the cattlemen's side of this trouble. Joe had told him, and Rutledge's talk had made such sense that Joe had hoped it might appease even Tom Esau.

"Well," Joe said, with caution, "Tom is for building a dam, as you know. But no rancher is crazy about having farmers move in, and they'll back Tom up, especially since their ranches all lie above his and he couldn't hurt their water supply. The land my place is on, and the land you folks are planning to have titles to in five years, is all part of what Tom claimed as his, though he never used it much."

"I see," said Rutledge. "You're right between us 160-acre small fry and Esau."

In more ways than one, Joe thought. He took the coffee and slice of pound cake Susan brought him, thanking her. She had pretty hands that had a sure, steady look in spite of their grace. He figured she do more than play a pianoforte. Funny, he had never noticed Concepción's hands. A knock came on the door, and as Susan went to answer it, Joe turned to his host.

"Mr. Rutledge, I've got to tell you facts, not what would make easy telling and easy hearing. Tom Esau will build the dam. You won't have water. I know how this will sound to you, but I'd be a liar if I didn't advise you to get out. Tom plays rough."

"So can we." It was Hod Timmons, whom Susan had just let in. The one-time doctor, solid and brawny, was a far different proposition from the weary, soft-speaking Rutledge. Timmons strode past Susan, bowed to Mrs. Rutledge, and confronted Joe. "Tamblin, your place is between us and Esau. You'd better be deciding where you, personally, stand."

"Easy, Hod," soothed Rutledge. But Joe, glad to find someone he could argue with, swung around. "I'm a cattleman. Tom Esau saved my life and gave me a start. Where do you think I stand?"

Hod's jaw closed. "That's plain, I reckon."

"No." rapped Joe. He glanced to Mrs. Rutledge. "Ma'am, how do you have it figured?"

WITH a smile that spread to light her clear eyes, Mrs. Rutledge said, "I think you know the farmers are coming. I think you'd rather have us for neighbors than any other people you might get later on.

And probably you've told Mr. Esau this."

"Yes?" prompted Joe, as her face clouded.

Her distress seemed more for him than for her people in that moment. "I think you're like your land, Mr. Tamblin, caught between us. You owe Mr. Esau a lot, but you think he's mistaken."

"Fence-straddling's another name for it," Hod Timmons barked, glaring at Joe with distrustful hazel eyes. "Tamblin, we won't stand for a dam. Together, we farmers can muster thirty men, and we're not bad shots. Lots of men have gotten killed in a crossfire, mister!"

Joe straightened to his feet, handing Susan his cup and plate. His nerves were tingling, but he tried for humor. "You think I should grab my Winchester and start shooting in both directions?"

"Fool around," said Hod, "and you may not get a chance to."

Joe's temper blew like a snapped cord. He whirled on Timmons. "Say, do you want a fight?"

Rutledge got between them. "Hod," he said sternly, "Tamblin is my guest." Turning to Joe, Rutledge's voice held regret. "I can sympathize with the spot you're in, sir. But a man must protect himself. If your friend builds the dam, we'll have to stop him." A smile nudged the tired corners of his mouth. "Neutral countries and neutral men, Mr. Tamblin, have it coming from all sides."

"Looks that way," Joe said ruefully. He hoped if he had to kill anyone in the coming fandango, it wouldn't be Rutledge. "Well, thanks for the refreshments, Mrs. Rutledge, Miss Susan." With a bow to them, and a nod to his host, Joe picked up his hat and went out.

Unhitching his mare, he swung up and turned for the road. But there was the sound of a door opening and closing, and Susan's voice called his name.

"Mr. Tamblin."

Now what? he wondered. He reined in the mare. "Here," he called softly. "Can I do something for you, Miss Susan?"

"You can eat this cake," she said, handing him a cloth-wrapped package. "Hod's fussing may have given the other a bad taste. I don't want you to think I can't cook."

Awkwardly taking it, he looked down, wishing he knew what she expected, wishing he knew a little more about women. She had a nice smell that reminded him vaguely of some kind of little silk pillows his mother had used to tuck in among her nightgowns and petticoats. Had it been dried rose leaves in the pillows? Whatever it was Susan smelled like they had.

"It's mighty kind of you," he fumbled.

Susan's tone grew a bit impatient, as if she were peeved about something. "Are you that overwhelmed to get a piece of cake? Surely Mrs. Esau can bake!"

It took him a minute to realize that she meant Concepción. The thought of that Span-

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SURE CURE

By LIMERICK LUKE

There was a young cowpoke named Butch,
Who liked poker, likker and such,
Till a home-loving lass
Roped him off of wild grass,
And now he's not seen in town much!

---

ish will-o'-the-wisp mixing up flour and sugar and things struck Joe with such force that, before he could help himself, he hooted with laughter.

"Concepción can't make her own hot chocolate."

The tall girl beside his mare seemed to grow taller. It was too dark to be sure, but Joe thought she was clenching her fists. "You don't need to laugh at me because I bake, Mr. Joe Tamblin!" she flamed. "I do the washing and ironing, too. Good-night."

Before he could stammer out one word, she was inside and the door had slammed. It must have been a solid oak door, because it didn't break. Joe, blazing mad, started to chuck the cake away, but then, slowly, he stuck it in his coat pocket.

Rutledge had sunk what was left of his money in this westward venture; but Susan hadn't always done the work. Maybe she'd thought he was throwing Concepción's idleness in her face. Hunching his shoulders, Joe rode along home. He'd liked Mrs. Rutledge, he more than liked Susan, though she puzzled him. What would happen to them if Esau put in that dam? Or if Rutledge tried to stop it?

Joe thought over these questions for a couple of days. He got no answers except for one sure fact: he was right between Esau and the farmers. If a fight started, he'd have to jump to one side or the other, fast, before the crossfire got him.

Whichever way he went, he'd feel low-down, a traitor. How could he forget the years with Esau? Yet how could he back up Esau when the cattleman planned murder? The farmers would have to fight to stop the dam. Esau would do his best to kill them all when the trouble cut loose, and say later, if the law required him to say anything, that the farmers were trespassing.

BUT the men with their first crops ready to start planting, with their nucleus herds, their painfully builded cabins—they wouldn't leave. They couldn't sell their cattle and still hold up their heads in Cross Rivers Valley.. Joe swallowed his black breakfast coffee, poured himself some more, and noticed with a kind of wild shame that his hand was shaking.

"Hell!" he said aloud. "The thing is, does Tom own this country, or does he just live here?"

"Most of us know," came a voice that sent a dark quickening through Joe's blood even before, whirling, he recognized Concepción. "But what you think, *muchacho,* should be interesting."

Little boy, she called him. It was a taunt Joe had to ignore. With her, it was a struggle not to act like a—what? Not a man; an animal who had no gratitude, no memory of a friend. Forcing a smile, Joe offered her one of the two chairs.

"Some coffee, *Señora?"*

She frowned, fine arched brows drawing together. "Why do you call me *señora* when I am younger than you?"

Looking down at her smooth black hair, Joe wondered if she still rubbed it with orris root. At the same time he was fighting to understand what it was he felt about her, beyond desire.

Sympathy? No, her pride forbade it. Once or twice, when the circumstances, not her reaction to them, had made Joe look toward her with pity, a wish to defend her, she had sent him a glance of contemptuous rebuke that was worse than a blow.

He had seen that same pride in the gaze of a trapped eagle. What right, it seemed to say, do you have to feel sorry for me?

Well, I don't feel sorry for you, Joe thought, watching her now as her bright mouth bowed with scorn. Everything Esau's dealt you, you've given him back in spades!

"I call you *señora,"* said Joe, pouring her a cup of coffee and handing it to her, "because you are married. You are the wife of Esau."

"Ah." She smiled. "The wife of *el señor.* And *señor* means master."

Joe gripped the table edge. "Go home!" he said when he could speak. "Go home before—"

"Before what?" Sitting down, she turned up an amused, innocent face. "You don't think I'd come here without the consent of my husband, do you? We want you to have supper with us this evening, José. My husband would have come to ask you, but he's busy. Work has started on the dam."

Joe stared. "Already?"

She shrugged. "The ranch isn't interested in cattle right now, my José. Now it is getting many trees and rocks dragged up by the river, and getting plenty of dynamite." She was watching him, Joe realized, prying behind his face with her cold quiet eyes.

"You wanted to be sure I knew all about it," he said, coming around the table. "Why?"

Her mask shattered. Springing up, she caught his arm. "José, you don't want that dam built. Stop it!"

Putting his hands on her shoulders, he pushed her back to where he could scan her face.

"Why should I stop it? How could I stop it? And why do you want me to?"

"Esau!" she said. "Esau."

White teeth curved down on the warm lower lip, and her eyes glowed. She was beautiful, but in a way that made Joe's veins cold, and he let go of her, thinking she must be crazy.

"He's your husband," he said sharply. "Tear him down and you fall, too." When she only laughed, Joe burst out angrily, "Why do you want him hurt?"

"Because he has hurt me."

Curling his lip in disbelief, Joe glanced significantly at her unmarked body, her well-kept hands, her exquisite clothes. "If he has, Concepción, you've made a good thing of it."

"Oh, he didn't mark what you see—the arms or the throat." In one sweeping motion, she tore off the red silk scarf at her neck, held it up between her hands. Slowly, thoroughly, she ripped it to shreds.

"I want to do this to his pride," she said, and let the silk flutter to the floor before she stepped on it deliberately. "Oh José, it would be easy. Dynamite charges could be put under each start he gets made on the dam. I could hide the explosives. You'd pick your own time to use them."

Joe put the length of the room between them, but he swung about to find her at his heels. No wonder she was the darkness in his blood.

It would be so easy to take that mouth and let the world be all black. He clamped his hands behind him.

"You and Esau are alike. Go on home, chuck your pride. You might end up loving him."

THE corners of her mouth froze. "I'll love him, when he's broken as I have been. Poor José! Your farmer girl will feed you cream and butter. You will get fat and never dream."

"Concepción," Joe said from the depths of that strange feeling for her which wasn't love, but wasn't all desire, either, "I hope your dreams won't be nightmares." There was a thickness in his ears that almost made his own voice inaudible.

When she cried his name, throwing her arms about him, he thought it was for himself. He was a welter of guilt, amaze, and regret, until the voice cracked, from the door, "Joe!"

It seemed to Joe that a smile flickered on Concepción's lips as she moved back. For himself, he was too stunned to do anything. His gaze locked with the gray storm of Esau's. Esau could beat him to a pulp, probably, but it was the agony in Esau's eyes, not fear, that made Joe blurt, "Tom, it isn't what you think!"

The three of them stood there a minute. Then Esau's big shoulders moved forward and his arms dropped, hanging limp, as his eyes crept painfully to Concepción.

"I never owned the sun or the wind. How could I own you? I—oh, hell. Get yourself home." She went out, without haste. When she was gone, Esau swung back, his face changing. "The girl I can understand, maybe, but you—" Esau flexed his hands together. Joe's utter stillness seemed to reach into his rage, though, because after turning to the door a second, Esau wheeled. "I won't kill you, on account of the boy I believed you were. Not now. But if you ever come on my land, I'll kill you." He whirled and plunged outside.

Joe stood there a long time after the hoofbeats faded. Then, carefully, he knelt, and gathered up all the torn red scraps. Going to the door, he opened his hand, and the wind, tearing the silk from his fingers, slapped his face like a scornful whip.

Why don't I go? he was still thinking that evening near sundown. Why don't I get the hell out? Esau can build his dam and watch the crawdads die unless they kill him first. And maybe now that Concepción has hurt him like she wanted to, they'll work something

out between them—thunder and lightning, like they are, or a nice earthquake. But the roots of his heart were sunk and tangled around Esau. He couldn't go. He had to stay and see an end, even if it were his own.

Susan came, while he was blindly looking west. "Joe! Joe, hurry. Mrs. Esau is trying to blow up the dam site and the men working there. Hurry!"

On their pounding, driving ride, Susan jerked out the story. Concepción had slipped a note to the Rutledge home by way of her old Mexican maid. The note asked Rutledge to have armed men at the dam site around sundown to finish off what Concepción planned to start with her charge of explosives. Joe shook his head, trying to clear it, as he glanced at Susan.

"What I can't figure is why you're trying to stop her."

Susan's words came gustily, ripped from her mouth by the wind. "We'll stop the dam, but not this way! People aren't going to say we got a wife to betray her husband, maybe kill him!" They pounded on. After a while, Susan said, "I got you because you can warn Mr. Esau. He'll believe you. Father sent me alone to prevent any trouble. But Joe, don't tell Mr. Esau about his wife."

It was sundown when they pulled up their horses. Esau had logs felled and dumped into the narrowing of the river, where he meant to put the dam. He had quite a pile there already of rock, trees, and brush. Joe scanned it, wondering where Concepción had her dynamite planted.

Then he saw her, a slight figure beside Esau's huge body, there on the bank. The two of them were actually laughing. And after she laughs with him, Joe thought, she'll go down and set off that charge and the whole works will go sky-high. Esau will, too, unless he gets back from there.

Swinging down from the saddle, Joe told Susan, "Stay here and keep back."

CONCEPCION saw him. She said something, and Esau turned, his face blackening. Joe's heart came up into his mouth, but he walked on till he could be heard.

"Tom, there's a charge of explosives in that stuff down there. You'd better get it out."

Esau spread his big hands. "Are you lying? Or did you put it there?"

Concepción had slipped away, fading down the bank.

Without letting Esau know his wife was a traitor, there was no way to stop her. The thing now was to get Esau out of range of the blast.

"If you want to fight with me," Joe said, sweating in desperation as he saw, from the corner of his eye, the girl edging along the debris, "come away from that bank and I'll oblige."

Esau's hair burned gold in the last light. He started forward, arms swinging. "I'm going to break your backbone. I'm going to kill you."

Joe said nothing, but he felt an odd peace. He'd owed his life to Esau ever since that snow drift, eleven years ago. Waiting, Joe felt close to Esau again. But Concepción's voice swirled in between them.

"Señor," she cried. *"Señor!"*

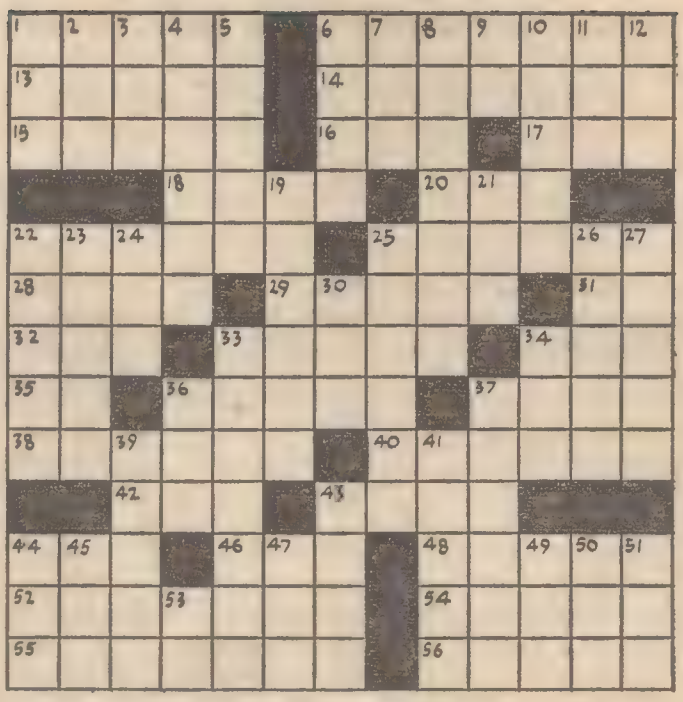
That was all she called to Esau, all she had to. The rest was plain, as she bent to light something wedged in between the logs, and stayed there when that was done, with her arms stretched out. Whipping around, Esau screamed her name, running for her, sliding down the bank. He swept her up just as the explosion caught them both, hurling them away with Esau's dam, two people who lived more in that last flash, probably, than they had in all their mixed, tortured life together.

On the way to Susan's home, Joe finally had to say, "Did she hate him that much?"

Susan shook her head. "Not when he came. It was his chance, you see, to die with her, and he took it, since they couldn't live together."

That was true, the way Joe saw it. He took a deep breath. Ingrown, twisted roots deep down inside him seemed to be straightening. It hurt, but in a way he felt better. Nudging his horse, he came level with Susan and they rode forward, beside each other.

THE WESTERNERS' CROSSWORD PUZZLE



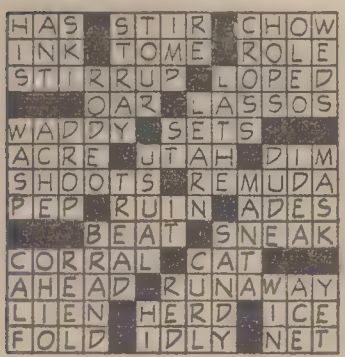
The solution of this puzzle will appear in the next issue

ACROSS

1 Western cattle farm
6 Reddish-brown horses
13 Western state
14 Western treeless land
15 Started
16 An eternity
17 Likely
18 Froglike creature
20 Cooking fuel
22 Roy ——, cowboy
25 New
28 Raw minerals
29 Man's garment
31 Either
32 To stroke gently
33 Enjoys a book
34 Sound of disapproval
35 And (Latin)
36 Palomino
37 Coating on iron
38 Religious
40 Salary increases
42 To possess
43 Largest continent
44 Man's name
46 Donald's nickname
48 Step
52 Newly enlisted soldier
54 Cowboy's rope
55 Church spire
56 Written composition

DOWN

1 Curved bone
2 Lemon drink
3 To scold constantly
4 Rodeo enclosures
5 Nobleness
6 Hastened
7 Gold (Spanish)
8 Texas mounted police
9 Rhode Island (abbr.)
10 To rub out
11 Part of the mouth
12 Matched group
19 To declare
21 To perform on stage
22 Lassoed
23 To make an oration
24 To acquire
25 Horsemen
26 Lasso loop
27 Moves, as a horse
30 Owns
33 Gathering of cattle
34 Motor coach
36 In what way
37 Lariats
39 Vocal sound
41 Theater passageway
43 Poker stake
44 Stammering sounds
45 To allow
47 Petroleum
49 Donkey
50 Isaiah (abbr.)
51 Dale Evans's mate
53 Musical note



Solution to puzzle in preceding issue

MURDER AND ROBBERY were Jordine's business . . . and a thing like killing a woman couldn't stop him from getting what he wanted

"I know what to do," Hope said quietly as she knelt beside the wounded man . . .

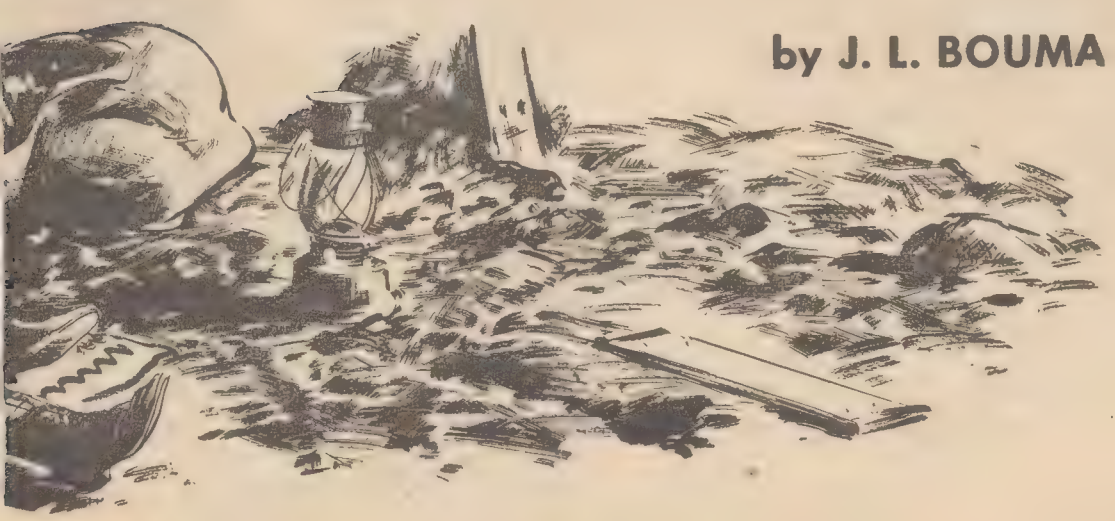
CRISIS at Carbine Canyon

by J. L. BOUMA

THE morning was bright and already hot. And it was lifeless, except for the man on the rim of the canyon near its mouth, who scanned the powdered haze of the desert southward through a pair of field glasses.

Dow Daly shifted the Winchester to his left hand and took his hat off. He could feel a faint breeze cooling the sweat on his forehead. It made him think of cold water from the spring that Blackie Jordine and his gang of outlaws had taken over, but he was grateful for the breeze just the same. He was grateful because he knew that soon the canyon would be a sweltering prison from which there was no escape.

He put his hat back on, a tall, thin man of thirty with a lean, sun-blackened face. His eyes were deep-set and very blue, and a hint of restrained rage lurked in their corners. He was furious that he and



the people with him had been forced into this situation.

He heard footsteps behind him and turned to see Hope Hadley coming from the cabin, a shapely dark girl in calico with a heavy mane of black hair swinging about her shoulders.

She raised sensitive eyes to the canyon rim and said quietly, "So they have someone watching?"

"He climbed up there right after we had our talk."

"What is there to watch for in this country?" There was no trace of bitterness, nor of defeat, in her throaty voice. "We saw hardly anyone from the time we crossed the border at El Paso."

"They're looking for prospectors, troops, stray cowpunchers," he said, "or Apaches, maybe. They can't afford interference."

She looked him full in the face. "Are we to die here?"

Dow forced himself to smile at her, this strange girl he had known less than twenty-four hours. She was blunt and realistic, and he liked that in her.

"Not if we can help it," he said. Then he added, "How's your father?"

"He coughed most of the night, but he's sleeping now."

Dow glanced toward Hektoen. The stocky, bearded man sat against a boulder facing down canyon, a carbine across his knees. The Mexican Garcia was in the pole corral, tending to the dozen mules, the two horses. Four of the mules, the scrawnier of the lot, belonged with the covered wagon that had brought the Hadleys clear from Brownsville. It was parked next to Dow's big work wagon, in which he and Hektoen had returned yesterday from Douglas with a load of supplies.

"These are the Chiricahua Mountains, aren't they?" the girl said. "Have you ever had trouble here before?"

"No."

"How long have you been here?"

"About five months. That's when I staked my claim."

He looked past the piles of tailing and the yawning mouth of the tunnel and on up the narrow, twisting canyon where Tucker Wells and Stroud had disappeared over an hour ago to see if they could find a way out. They couldn't. Dow had scouted this dead-end canyon often enough to know that.

But Tucker had wanted to see for himself, mainly because his nerves wouldn't let him sit still in moments like this. "No harm in trying," he had said shortly. "We have till noon, and I'm not going to waste the time waiting to get shot. It's my neck too, you know."

True, Dow thought now. But someone had to stay and hold the fort, because Blackie Jordine wasn't to be trusted. He raised his eyes to the overhanging cliffs, reddish and gray in the sunlight. There was no way out except through the front door, he thought. It was a narrow doorway, at that, a gap scarcely wide enough to accommodate the big work wagon. And Jordine had five rifles to stop them if they tried.

But still the situation wasn't entirely hopeless. For if they couldn't get out without being shot, neither could Jordine and his men take them without stopping lead. It was a stand-off for sure, except for the lack of water. The lack of water posed a dilemma.

"You'd better put on a hat," Dow told Hope. "This sun can kill."

"You're right," she agreed, and turned back to the cabin.

Dow walked over to Hektoen. As he always did when mucking ore in the mine, the bearded man wore a red bandanna on his hair, the corners knotted. It made him look like the pirates Dow had read about as a boy.

Dow said, "I think they followed us here, Charlie. What do you think?"

"It's possible."

"Jordine sure knew all about me, though."

Hektoen grunted. Dow looked at his watch. "Ten o'clock. If they try anything before noon, use that rifle."

"You think they'll let the Hadleys go if you ask again?"

"Yeah," Dow said. "Just about as far as they can spit. Watch the rim, Charlie. They might try something from up there."

Garcia came up. "It's getting hot." The old Mexican's eyes narrowed, and his mouth curved thoughtfully. "I could maybe get past

them when it is dark," he said slowly. "What do you think, *Senor* Daly? It is ten miles to the stage road, and I could be there maybe in three hours and get help."

"We'll wait and see what happens next."

"I have heard much of this Blackie Jordine. He's a bad *hombre*. He will kill us all and steal the ore."

"Not if I can stop him," Dow said. "You stay here now with Charlie, *amigo*."

"There is no water for the animals, *senor*."

"And none for us. But let's not worry—yet," Dow said, and turned toward the mine.

He walked between the piles of tailings and entered the cool tunnel. Sixty-three bulging sacks of high-grade ore were stacked against the timber-shored walls. Five months' work, but that was nothing. It had been a breeze, he told himself, remembering the day he had first prospected this canyon. He had known from the moment he saw the outcropping of quartz that this was it. The bullfrog-green rock had been heavy with gold, and a quick trip to the assayer at Douglas had confirmed his hopes. He had struck it rich.

STILL it was hard to tell, and at first he had worked alone, thinking the vein would peter out before long. It hadn't. He had dug a good ten feet and was widening his tunnel when he knew he would need timber to shore up its sides and brace its ceiling. But timber was hard to come by in this country of mesquite and wind-twisted juniper, so he had hired Tucker Wells to cut and haul on a sled what he needed from the higher, pine-clad slopes.

Tucker was a likable fellow. Dow had known him since they had worked together on the big wagons hauling ore from the mines around Tombstone to the mills at Contention, and they had always gotten along.

Two weeks later, after deciding that he needed extra help, Dow made a trip to Douglas and had returned with Stroud and Hektoen, both of whom knew all there was to know about mucking ore. Not long after this, Garcia had drifted in from the hills, a sheepherder with no sheep to tend, and a tolerable cook. Dow hired him on the spot, and the men worked harder for knowing they wouldn't have to cook their own meals after their daily stint.

Now the main tunnel, and two branching tunnels, wormed a good fifty feet into the side of the cliff, and the vein was about petered out. Another week or two should see the end of it. That's what Dow had decided when he and Hektoen set out for Douglas and a last load of supplies.

They had returned during the afternoon of the previous day, with no idea of the trouble that lay ahead. More than one prospector had lost his life and his pokes of dust to outlaws, and Dow had always kept a wary eye on his surroundings, but this day neither he nor Hektoen sensed they were being watched.

The wagon ground across its previous tracks for there were no roads in this arid wilderness. The mules breasted their collars as they climbed the gritty slopes through the cacti and Joshua trees and Spanish Bayonets toward the red and yellow walls of sandstone that reared into the brassy sky. At a glance it was worthless country, but once a man uncovered its wealth, he looked at it with different eyes.

It was that way with Dow, even though he was already thinking of grassy slopes dotted with cattle. A man couldn't stand still, and Dow had a ranch in mind where streams cut the land and trees changed their leaves with the seasons. Take it easy, he told himself. There'll be time enough for that after you get your ore to the mill and collect your check.

The mules jerked their heads as they passed the spring below the mouth of the canyon, a trickle of water from a blowout of lava that ended in a pool edged by coarse grass and a few willows. It was enough to water their animals and satisfy their own needs. Tucker Wells came to meet them, grinning widely.

He put a boot on a spoke and let the wheel carry him up as it turned, and then stepped into the wagon, saying they had company. "A fellow named Walter Hadley and his daughter, from Texas. They took what they figured was a short-cut to Tucson and dropped a wheel rim about a mile from here. They saw our smoke and came looking for help."

"When did all this happen?" Dow asked.

Three days back. Stroud and Garcia went and fixed the wheel, and then the girl asked

to stay for a spell so her father can get some rest. He's got lung fever."

Dow grunted. "This isn't the kind of country for a sick man and a girl to be traveling alone in."

"I wouldn't mind if they stayed on," Tucker said. "The girl sure is a looker."

Dow saw her standing beside the covered wagon as they rolled up, and he could hear a man coughing under the canvas. He found himself getting irritated as the day passed into evening, but he did his best to be a good host. It wasn't the company he minded, but the foolishness of their trek that nettled him. He was thinking of the folks that had died of thirst in this country, and the fact that you could never tell when a bunch of young Apaches might break loose to loot and to hunt glory.

After supper, Tucker took his guitar and played and sang a flock of Mexican tunes, his bright eyes never leaving the girl. She seemed to enjoy it, too, probably not having heard music for some time. Dow didn't have much to say to her. Out of politeness he looked in on Walter Hadley, and when he saw the wasted face and the feverish eyes he suggested to her that they move him into the cabin.

"It gets chilly nights, and he'll be better off inside four walls," he said, adding, "You can stay in there with him."

"That's kind of you," she said. "But where will you men sleep?"

"Around the fire," Dow told her, which is what they did.

They rose with the dawn. As he did every morning, Garcia loaded his water barrel in a wheelbarrow and went to fill it at the spring. He hadn't been gone five minutes when they heard the flat slap of a rifle shot, and then another.

They all stared at each other for the better part of a second. Stroud, a bulky man with a square face and scowling eyes, growled, "Now what the hell was that?"

No one answered. Dow started for his Winchester and then swung back as Garcia came at a stumbling run. The old Mexican was breathing hard and his eyes looked wild.

He gasped, "Blackie Jordine and his men fired on me when I reached the spring. They shot holes through the barrel and told me to go back and tell you. Blackie said he would talk to you within the hour."

"Blackie Jordine," Tucker breathed, and cut short his sudden cackling laugh.

DOW'S mind sharpened. Jordine was well known along the Arizona-Mexican border as a bandit wanted by both U.S. and Mexican authorities. The charges against him included just about everything from rustling to murder.

"Are you sure, Garcia?"

The Mexican nodded emphatically. "I have seen him too many times to make the mistake, *senor*."

Dow looked around and found the others watching him. Hope Hadley had come from the cabin, a question in her eyes, and Dow waved her back. "Please stay inside, Miss Hadley. This is nothing for you." She turned back without a word, and Dow spoke to the men.

"Forget about working this morning and look to your guns. Tucker and I'll talk to Jordine when he shows. The rest of you stay back and hold on to your rifles. I want him to see for himself that we're not helpless."

"Do you suppose he knows about the ore?" Tucker asked quickly.

Dow said coldly, "Not unless one of you talked the times you were in town."

"Hell, everyone within fifty miles knows you got a mine up here."

"Maybe so," Dow said, "but mine isn't the only tunnel within fifty miles."

Stroud looked at him strangely and turned away. Hektoen and Garcia followed. Tucker put his hands on his hips and said, "Say, what were you getting at?"

"Nothing," Dow said, and it was true.

But for a second there he had been almost certain that someone had talked out of turn. Well, it was possible. More than one holdup had been planned after someone talked too much.

Blackie Jordine came within the hour, as he had promised. He walked forward alone, but five men with rifles showed themselves a hundred yards back. Jordine was big and

swarthy, with a sweeping black mustache, and two belts of ammunition criss-crossed his chest, Mexican bandit style. He came up smiling, but Dow noticed that his eyes were as remote and heartless as a snake's.

"Well, Daly," he said, "how is the mining business?"

"How's the bandit business?" Dow said swiftly.

Jordine laughed. He glanced briefly at Tucker and then looked again at Dow. He said, "I guess we understand each other, eh?"

"It's up the spout as far as I'm concerned," Dow said. "Talk facts, man!"

"We want the ore."

"What do you know about ore?"

Jordine studied him with smiling interest. "You located here five months ago. You hired men and bought mules and a wagon. Now and then you came in for supplies, but you never brought any ore in with you. And it'd have to be ore because there's no mill here and not enough water for a sluice box or a long tom."

Jordine spoke casually, but Dow sensed a menacing power behind his words. Here was a hunted man with nothing left to fear, and this lack was the very thing that made him dangerous. It impressed Dow, but it didn't change his mind about Jordine. "Where'd you learn all this about me?" he asked coldly.

"Questions lead to answers, Daly. And now that we've got the answers, we want the ore. *Pronto!*"

"Don't *pronto* me," Dow said. "You know where you can go and what you can do when you get there."

Jordine seemed not to hear. He was grinning at Tucker. Dow glanced at Tucker himself and saw him standing stiff and pale, his lips tight together.

"Listen," the outlaw said, as though Dow's words had just reached him. "I'll give you till noon to think it over. If the answer is no, we'll take it in our own way. It's that simple."

"All right," Dow said.

Jordine said, "You have grub but no water. You're finished, Daly, so make it easy."

Dow started to explain about the Hadley's, but Jordine stopped him. "Nobody leaves here until we get that ore," he said.

Hope clung to him, her body trembling

"Then we can leave?"

Jordine grinned. "Sure. Why not? You'll leave all right."

"Is that the way it is?" Dow asked tonelessly.

"You figure it out," Jordine said. "Ask him," he said, grinning at Tucker. "Till noon, Daly. That's all the time you get." He turned and strode away.

Tucker muttered, "He's something, isn't he? I saw him kill a man in Nogalas one time. He was grinning that same way."

Dow looked at him quickly.

"He's not so big that a bullet won't stop him."

"I'd hate to try it, believe me," Tucker said. "What are we gonna do, Dow?"

"What would you say?" Dow asked, watching him.

"I don't know. I wouldn't blame you for not turning over that ore, but what else is there to do?"

"You think giving him the ore'll make any difference? Listen, Tuck. It'd take him at least a week to haul it where it would do him any good. We'd have the law on his tail before that, and he knows it."

Tucker blinked. "You mean—"

"You know damn well what I mean," Dow said brutally. "Grow up, will you? He'll kill us, knowing it might be as long as a month before anybody comes out here to investigate. By that time he'll be spending what he got for that ore—which will be plenty."

Tucker looked sick. "We got to find a way out of here."

"There's no way out except the way we came in."

That's when Tucker had mentioned that his neck was involved, when he had taken Stroud to seek a way out of the canyon. Now it was pushing toward noon, and before long Jordine would be back for his answer.

STEPPING out of the tunnel, Dow saw Hope coming toward him. She said, "In all my life I've never seen a mine. Do you mind if I look inside?"

"Of course not."

Dow knew she understood the spot they were in, and though earlier she had shown a hint of strain, now she covered it with curiosity about the mine. He found himself explaining about the ore. He opened a sack and showed her a sample. She studied it closely and looked up at him.

"Is this really so valuable?"

"There's a chunk of quartz about as big as the crown of my hat on display in a Tombstone saloon. It's estimated to be worth a thousand dollars. This ore isn't that rich by a long shot, but what there is in these sacks should bring me about fifty thousand."

"No wonder Jordine wants it."

"It's better than robbing stage coaches."

"I wouldn't know what to do with all that money. We never had much, you see. My father was a printer in Brownsville, but he's really a scholar. When he became sick, the doctors told him that unless he moved to a dry climate he would die. So we started for Tucson in a wagon, because we couldn't afford the stage fare." She spoke in a matter-of-fact tone, with no trace of self-pity, and smiled at him. "We're grateful for the food and the chance to rest here."

Dow hid his amazement with little success. What a strange girl! A short hour ago she had asked him if they were all to die here, and now she was being grateful for what amounted to ordinary hospitality. It was as if she had suddenly accepted their situation without question, and showed a core of inner strength that Dow had not guessed was there.

"I'm only sorry this rotten business has happened while you're here," he said awkwardly.

"There's no need to explain, Mr. Daly." She flushed. "It happened, that's all. You had no choice in the matter." She smiled again and turned toward the cabin, as Tucker and Stroud came into view up the canyon.

Dow watched the slight sway of her hips as she walked. He had never known a girl like her, nor one who spoke as she spoke. Tucker was also watching her as he came up. He gave Dow a sour look.

"You were right. A man'd need wings to get out of this hole."

Stroud came up, and his scowling eyes moved across Dow. "What do you aim to do, Daly?"

"What do you suggest?"

Stroud swore. He sank down on a pile of tailing and leaned his rifle between his knees. "What a stinking mess!" he said furiously. "I hired out to muck ore, not to fight outlaws." He spat. "I'm thirsty as hell."

"You just think you're thirsty because there's no water handy," Dow said. "Tell me next week that you're dying for a drink and I'll believe you."

"Next week!" Stroud exploded.

"You don't have to stay," Dow said. "Nobody's stopping you from leaving."

"You think I'd duck this?" Stroud raged. "Hell, I'm just mad, that's all." He got up and walked away, a resentful swing to his shoulders.

Dow chuckled. From the day he had hired Stroud he had thought of the man as a selfish grouch, and he had been wrong. Stroud's gruff manner covered a lot of man.

Tucker was watching him. "You said this would go on for a week," he accused. "Do you really mean that?"

"Why not?"

"Because a week from now we won't have the strength to crawl, let alone walk."

"Take it easy."

"Water's life out here, man! Three days from now we won't be able to spit."

"We can always butcher a mule and drink blood," Dow said.

"You're funning."

"Am I?"

Tucker was a disappointment, the more so because he was an old friend. Dow had never thought of him as an employee, but more like a partner. Tucker had worked hard and Dow meant to give him a share of the ore check. Now he did not like the way Tucker was making him feel.

"Why shouldn't I worry about my own hide!" Tucker demanded. "Nobody else is gonna worry."

"You know better than that."

Blood reddened Tucker's cheeks. He looked away from Dow, a little ashamed of himself. Then he grinned apologetically. "Got the wind up, I reckon," he muttered.

"There's plenty of reason for it," Dow admitted, and they grinned at each other. Dow looked at his watch. "Let's go. I don't want to disappoint Jordine."

Tucker nodded grimly and followed Dow's swinging stride down the canyon.

IT WAS a different Jordine who approached them at noon, Dow noticed. An air of purpose clung to the man. It could be felt in the way he walked, heavy shoulders forward, eyes cold and direct below the brim of his hat, and in the way he carried his rifle tilted up in one big hand.

The heads and shoulders of four men showed in the boulders behind him. Dow threw a quick glance at the canyon rim, but the man with the field glasses was not there. He looked straight at Jordine as he murmured to Tucker, "Get back with the rest of 'em and watch the rim. There's liable to be some shooting."

Tucker grunted and edged back, then turned and began to walk fast toward the others, his gaze sweeping both rims of the canyon.

Dow waited. Jordine came forward and stopped. His eyes studied Dow's face for a long moment. "I have my answer," he said finally. "There's no point in telling me."

"What did you expect?"

Jordine's eyes glittered with what might have been a smile. "Yeah. You're not yellow, that's for sure."

"How do your men feel about this business?"

"They got no feeling," Jordine said bluntly. "As long as we're together and get enough to eat and drink, with a woman thrown in once in a while, we're as happy as the next man. But it takes money, and that's what we're after."

"You'd kill a woman?"

Jordine shrugged. "Why not? Folks die of one thing or another every day, Daly. A few more or less doesn't matter."

"You aren't worth a damn, you know that?"

"Words don't mean anything," Jordine said. "I saw a parrot once that could talk."

"Then I guess there's nothing more to say."

"Right." Jordine turned and walked away.

He was within a few steps of his men when he brought the barrel of his rifle down sharply. Dow saw this and jumped to one side, as a shot exploded above him. The bullet raised dust where he had just been. Jordine whirled and spanged four quick shots at Dow's men, then threw himself behind cover as his own men opened fire.

Dow ducked behind a rock and looked across the narrow canyon. He could see a spot of red moving above a boulder. Hektoen had better take that bandanna off, he thought. It made too good a target. The rest of the men were shooting from cover at the base of the cliff. Shooting wild, Dow thought. They'd be better off saving their ammunition.

The rifle above them hammered again. Dow heard a sharp cry. Someone had been hit. He took his hat off, pushed his Winchester forward across jagged rock, and raised his head slowly. At the distance of a hundred yards the corner of a face above the stock of a rifle seemed the size of a twobit piece. Dow fired at it. He saw his bullet smoke against the boulder, saw the face jerk out of sight.

Suddenly Jordine's men stopped firing. They slipped from boulder to boulder to the mouth of the canyon, and disappeared.

"Hold your fire!" Dow shouted. "But keep watching for the one on the rim."

"Stroud got hit!" Tucker's voice was shrill.

Be quiet, damn you, Dow thought. Why yell out and let Jordine know that he had one less man to worry about? Dow ran at a crouch across the clearing. There were no shots. Hektoen grinned at him from behind a boulder.

"I tried dusting that joker up there, but I missed."

"Don't shoot unless you have something to shoot at. And take that damn bandanna off! You can spot it a mile. If he hits it he'll splatter your brains all over the canyon."

"The hell with him. You notice they kept their shots away from the corral?"

"They figure they need the mules. Keep watching the rim, Charlie. I have an idea they'll be pouring it on us from up there before long, and I want to get the Hadleys in the tunnel first thing."

Hektoen scowled. "Why don't we back off up the canyon and make a stand?"

"And give 'em the ore? The hell with that."

Dow walked his way through the boulders. He found Stroud sitting in the slanting shade of the cliff, his shirt off. The bullet had torn through the heavy muscles at the junction of shoulder and neck, and the wound oozed blood. "Get to the tunnel and we'll fix you up," Dow said.

"I'll be all right," Stroud growled.

"Like hell," Dow said. "Give him a hand, Tuck."

Dow straightened and ran for the cabin. Hope met him at the door. She was pale, but her eyes and her voice were steady. "I heard someone cry out."

"Stroud got hit. Get your father ready to move to the tunnel. This clapboard cabin won't stop bullets."

WALTER HADLEY raised up from a bunk. "Mr. Daly, I don't hold with violence. Why men should try to kill each other is beyond me. Is there no way for you to reach an understanding with this man Jordine?" His pale lips worked and his eyes showed disapproval.

"The only things he understands are fighting and killing," Dow answered patiently.

"Nonsense! We are all civilized creatures, sir. I've never raised my hand in anger, and I've always gotten on well with my fellow men. If I talk to him—"

He broke out in a fit of coughing that left him gasping. The wasted cheeks turned pink and the eyes watered. Hope hurried to his side.

"Jordine means to kill us and take my ore," Dow said flatly. "That's all there is to it."

He took blankets from the bunks and piled them together. He loaded one blanket with grub and carried it to the tunnel. When he came back, Hope was helping her father from the cabin.

"Hurry," Dow snapped.

He pulled the brim of his hat low to scan the rim against the bright sky. Nothing moved there. He went inside for his warbag and returned to the tunnel. Hadley was sitting on a sack of ore, across from Tucker. Stroud lay on a blanket. Dow opened his warbag. He took out a white shirt and tore it into strips. Hope took them out of his hands.

"I know what to do," she said quietly.

She knelt beside Stroud and wiped the blood gently from around the wound. Dow turned to Tucker. "Get out there with Hektoen and Garcia," he said curtly.

Tucker rose and wet his lips. He started to speak. Then he met Hope's eyes, ducked his head and went out. Dow began piling sacks of ore across the mouth of the tunnel, leaving only the slit of an entrance. He piled them as high as he could lift, sweating heavily. Then he returned to the cabin to see if he could find anything else they might be able to use.

A mule brayed as he passed the corral, and a horse stamped and snorted. The animals were thirsty and the shooting had made them skittish. Dow looked at them, thinking that maybe he could shoot the mules. That would leave Jordine up a tree as far as hauling the ore out was concerned. Dow wondered if he would leave if the mules were dead.

No, he decided. Jordine had committed himself, and now that it had started there was no stopping it. The outlaw was in the driver's seat, and he would keep hold of the reins unless help arrived and drove him away. And that was a very unlikely prospect. . . . .

Dow had opened three cans of tomatoes, and what little liquid they contained had helped some to quench their thirst, but not much. They had all eaten and now, in the late afternoon, Stroud and the Hadleys were in the tunnel, while the rest of them squatted in the boulders against the side of the cliff. Now there were three of Jordine's men on the rim. They had fired at broken intervals, but for the past hour there had been no shooting. Dow was watching the rim. There was movement in a clump of creosote brush, the glitter of sun on metal.

"I'm gonna get that boy if he shows himself," he told Hektoen.

Hektoen shifted his position. "I'm damn near out of bullets."

"You were doing a lot of shooting a while back."

"I'm better with a hand gun."

"This isn't a hand gun fight. Not yet, anyhow."

He glanced toward Tucker and Garcia. They had all piled up the smaller boulders in between the larger ones and were pretty well protected here. Jordine would play hell getting at them.

"They're probably waiting for it to get dark," Dow said.

Hektoen grunted. He pulled his gunbelt around until his holstered Colt hung between his thighs. "You gonna let Garcia try and sneak past 'em tonight?"

"If he wants to."

Dow got one knee under him and raised his rifle slowly, his eye narrowed. He looked up into the glare and saw the silhouette of a man's head and shoulders above the brush. He tucked the butt of the Winchester against his shoulder.

Hektoen said sharply, "Look!" and as he spoke brought his rifle up and fired.

Dust spurted to one side of the brush, and the man ducked out of sight. Hektoen swore.

"Dammit, Charlie, I had him lined up," Dow said.

"What a waste," Hektoen muttered. And then, "Where's your shotgun?"

"I took it to the tunnel."

"Tucker's in bad shape," Hektoen said. "Have you noticed?"

"He'll hold up," Dow said, and hoped he was right.

The canyon was in shadow now, and the sky took on a dusty depth as the sun lowered. Dow said, "Be right back," and ran at a crouch to the tunnel. A bullet spouted dirt from a pile of tailing, and he dropped flat behind the mound. When he raised up he saw the man high on the rim. The man was on his knees, but he ducked and came up again as Hektoen fired and missed.

Dow spanged a shot at the target. The front bead met and darkened the V-shaped notch and blended with the man's chest as Dow squeezed the trigger. The man's body jerked and he got to his feet as though he meant to walk away. Then he pitched forward and fell. He turned end over end three times as he fell, and bounced a little as he landed on the flat surface of a boulder and slid out of sight.

Dow took a ragged breath, feeling suddenly numb. He had been in a few tight spots during his life, but this was the first man he had ever killed. Don't think about it, he told himself. This is the way it is, so forget it.

He plunged toward the tunnel and crawled inside.

"How you feeling, Stroud?"

"Good enough to go out and give you a hand."

"Stay here. The four of us can hold 'em off."

DOW turned his head. It was pretty dark in the tunnel, but he could see Hadley sitting against the sacks of ore, a blanket around him. Hope sat beside her father.

Dow said, "How do you feel, sir?"

"Angry," Walter Hadley answered shortly. "For the first time in a good many years I'm angry. You just killed a man, Mr. Daly. You took a life, finished it, ended it. Now you ask me how I feel, when I should be asking you that same question."

"I don't like what happened," Dow said. "But I didn't start this little war, and I'd rather kill one of them than be killed."

"If I could only talk to Jordine, I'm sure he would be reasonable."

"You just don't understand his kind," Dow said patiently, and turned to look out the entrance. Hope came up to him.

"My father means well," she said softly.

"I know it. But he'd better get used to the fact that we might not leave here alive. Can you understand that?"

"Yes."

"Better get back. I'm gonna make a run for it."

She gripped his arm. "Please be careful. We wouldn't have much left with you gone."

The words made Dow feel oddly humble. Her eyes were dark pools in her pale face. and there was a hint of sadness in them. "I'll be all right," he said awkwardly, and waited until she had moved away before darting outside.

There were no shots. Maybe it was getting too dark for them to see well from up there, Dow thought. Or maybe losing a man had made them jittery. He came up beside Hektoen and heaved a long sigh.

"Did they pull back from the rim?"

"I reckon," Hektoen said disgustedly. "You sure got in a lucky shot, didn't you?"

Dow didn't answer. He called Garcia, and the old Mexican crawled over on his hands and knees. "What do you think?" Dow asked him.

"No moon tonight. I think maybe I can make it. My boots I will stick under my belt, so! And on my bare feet I'll move as quietly as an Apache."

"It's still risky," Hektoen muttered.

"Yeah," Dow said. "They'll kill you, *amigo*."

"First they must catch me."

Hektoen ran his fingers through his beard. "Which way you figure to go?"

"The left side is best because there are many big boulders, and outside there is much brush. As I considered this I thought of their horses. They might not be guarded, and it's possible that I can steal one of them."

"How about taking one of our horses straight through at a gallop?"

"Nothing doing," Dow said. "They'd hear him coming, and a horse makes too big a target. The only way is to sneak past 'em the way Garcia planned."

Hektoen nodded agreement. "Look," he said, turning to Garcia, "while you're trying to pass 'em, suppose I get on the other side and make some noise, eh? I could go a little ahead of you, maybe pull 'em over to my side and give you a better chance."

"It would be a help."

"I hope they don't build a fire at the entrance," Dow said. "If they do, you'll never get past 'em, *amigo*."

"They won't have a fire," Hektoen said.

"They might."

"If they do they're crazy," Hektoen said. "Suppose someone traveling below sees it? Maybe folks looking for company? No, Jordine won't take a chance on pulling anyone up this way."

Garcia had taken his boots off and was pushing the pliant tops under his belt. "I leave my gun, take only my knife," he said.

"Better wait until it's good and dark," Dow told him. He thought a second. "We could build a fire, but I don't reckon it would do much good, not between these walls."

"It wouldn't do a bit of good," Hektoen said. "Anyhow, there isn't enough wood."

"I'll burn the wagons and the cabin if it comes to that," Dow said. "We aren't licked by a long shot. Don't forget there's still dynamite in that second tunnel."

"What good will it do us?" Hektoen growled.

"I don't know—yet."

Hektoen grunted. The sun was down and the sky darkened above them. A little breeze swept down the canvon and cooled the air. It was a nice summery evening. Every so often Dow became aware of the horses and mules moving restlessly in the corral. He had forked them some hay, but it was water they wanted. I wouldn't mind a drink myself, Dow thought.

"I go pretty soon." Garcia whispered it, as though he were already on the move.

Tucker came over, a shadow crawling along the ground. "What's going on?"

Dow explained, and Tucker blew sharply through his tight lips. "Man, I wouldn't take that chance," he said.

Hektoen rose at a crouch. "Give me five minutes, Garcia," he said softly, and vanished.

They waited in silence as the darkness thickened.

"I go now," Garcia said finally, and Dow gripped his shoulder.

"Go with God, *amigo*."

The old Mexican crossed himself. Then he, too, vanished in the darkness in utter silence.

Dow waited a couple of minutes. Then he told Tucker, "Stay here," and moved forward himself. He could barely make out the entrance to the canyon; it was only as if the blackness were thinner there than anywhere else.

He moved cautiously, listening for the noise Hektoen had said he would make. Suddenly the night exploded. Guns hammered and little flames leaped in the darkness. There were four shots, and then silence fell again. Dow groaned. He knew instinctively that Garcia hadn't made it.

BOOTS crunched gritty sand; a shadow moved in the blackness. "Charlie?" Dow whispered.

"Yeah. I think they got him."

"You saw it?"

"I didn't see a thing until they started shooting."

"I didn't hear you make any noise."

"I didn't get a chance. I was getting set to toss some rocks when they fired." Hektoen swore. "They're scattered out so that even a lizard couldn't get past 'em."

"All right. You'd better get something to eat. Tuck and I'll stay here. And keep your mouth shut about Garcia."

"He was only a Mexican," Hektoen said.

Dow tried to see Hektoen's face in the darkness. "I never expected to hear that from you, Charlie."

Hektoen grunted as they moved back. "Where's Tucker?"

"Tuck," Dow called softly. There was no answer. "Maybe he went to the tunnel," Dow said.

Hektoen grunted again and walked away. Now why had he said that about Garcia? Dow wondered, and felt anger creeping up on him. He remembered that after hiring Stroud, Hektoen had approached him, saying he'd heard Dow was looking for miners. That was nearly five months ago, and they'd never had trouble. Now this.

Dow knew he'd never forget. What had made Hektoen say a thing like that? Maybe he was getting edgy, and saying things he didn't mean, the way a drunk would. Hell, Dow thought. He knew he was finished with Hektoen. He'd never be able to look at the man after this without remembering what he'd said.

The sound of someone moving reached Dow. There was the scrape of a boot, then a low curse. Dow lifted his Colt from its holster.

"Hold it right there or stop a bullet," he sang out.

"Dow?" Tucker's voice came high and shaky. "For heaven's sake, don't shoot, man."

Tucker came up and Dow said, "Where have you been?"

"Scouting."

"Scouting?" Dow raged softly. He reached out, took Tucker's shirt in his big fist, and drew him close. "You thought if Garcia got through you'd try it. I ought to beat the hell out of you."

"I was only gonna see—"

Dow pushed him away so violently that Tucker stumbled and fell. "Get over there in those boulders. Get going!"

A sick man and a wounded man and a girl, Hektoen, and this—this coward—that's what he had to depend on. It was a hell of a note.

He stood there with the feeling that more than darkness surrounded him. How had Jordine learned so much about him. Jordine, an outlaw who couldn't afford to stay in one place very long without exposing himself to possible capture? How had he known they were out of water? Had he guessed? Had he learned about Dow's activities through chance? Or had someone told him that the time was ripe to steal the ore?

Could it be that Tucker was putting on an act? Had he contacted Jordine just now? Wasn't he to be trusted?

Dow turned his head. Someone had come out of the tunnel. They had a lantern inside and Dow had seen a shadow block it out momentarily. Someone was moving toward the wagons, and Dow walked over there.

"Who is it?"

He heard a gasp. It was Hope Hadley. "What are you doing out here?" he asked.

"I came for my father's medicine. It's still in the wagon."

He hesitated. What did he know about her and her father? Maybe Hadley wasn't as sick as he made out. Was it a coincidence that they had come here almost the same time as Jordine? Were they connected with the outlaws?

"Was Garcia killed?" she asked.

"Who told you that?"

"Hektoen said he might have been shot. He said we'd be better off to pull back as far as possible and let Jordine have the ore."

Damn him! Dow thought. So it was true, Hektoen was edgy. He thought that once Jordine had the ore the outlaw would leave.

"He's wrong," Dow said. "Get your medecine and go back."

He helped her into the wagon. In a moment she was back and he helped her down, and he was astonished when she clung to him, her body trembling.

"I'm sorry," she whispered. "It's just that I'm so very frightened."

"You don't show it," he said harshly.

She took a step back and looked up at him. "Why are you angry with me?" she asked.

The quiet way she spoke slipped under his guard; she sounded almost like a little girl asking her parent what she had done that was wrong.

"I like to know where I stand," he muttered.

"I see," she said, but not as though she really did.

"You and your father—"

He broke off. Someone else came from the tunnel and disappeared into the darkness. It was Hektoen. Dow could hear his footsteps faintly.

There was no other sound. What was Jordine up to?

"What were you saying about me and my father?"

"Not a thing." Dow took her arm. "Let's go. I want to see if Stroud is well enough to handle a gun. They're liable to hit us any minute."

IN THE tunnel, he looked around and said, "Miss Hadley, I want you and your father to move back to that cross tunnel tonight. And douse that lantern; the light would only guide them here. Stroud, you think you can spend the night outside and handle a gun?"

"A hand gun, sure."

"Fine. I'm going for the dynamite. Maybe we can use it."

He turned as Tucker pushed inside, his face pale, his eyes stricken. Hektoen followed, a gun in his fist.

"Raise your hands and face the wall." Hektoen gestured with the gun. "Lift Daly's weapon, honey; he won't be needing it. Daly, drop that rifle!"

"You stinking sidewinder," Dow said. "No wonder they didn't shoot at you, even though you had that bandanna on your hair. No wonder you missed hitting anything."

"Drop that rifle!"

Dow let it fall. He saw that Tucker was already unarmed.

"Lift his gun, honey, or I'll plug your old man," Hektoen said.

Hope took the Colt from Dow's holster and threw it down.

"That's it," Hektoen said.

"You took your time," Dow said.

"Had to. This is the first time I've been able to get the bunch of you together."

"How long've you had this in mind?"

"For a month or so," Hektoen said. "Since I ran into one of Jordine's men that other time we went to town."

"And you met him again the last time we went, is that it?"

"That's it."

"And what do you plan to do now?" Walter Hadley asked angrily. He was still sitting against the wall, wrapped in his blanket, an unexpected toughness in his feverish eyes.

"In a minute I'm gonna yell for Jordine," Hektoen said. "What did you think?"

"And then?"

"What the hell?" Hektoen growled. "That's up to Jordine."

Hadley glanced at his daughter, then looked at Dow. "I still can't believe it, but I'm being forced—" he coughed, took a ragged breath —"forced to believe that what you said was

true. They will kill us, is that right?"

"That's it," Dow said.

"Yes," Hadley murmured, as if to himself. "And my daughter, too. But not right away. It's strange. I've read of such things happening, but I never believed—" He looked up at Hektoen. "How do you feel about it, sir?" he asked, as though he were really curious to know.

Hektoen swore roughly. "The hell with you. Get up and get over there with the rest of 'em."

Hope started to help her father, but Hektoen pushed her back with a rough thrust of his arm. "He can make it."

Hadley pulled the blankets from around him and rose slowly. He leaned his hands against a timber and broke into a fit of coughing. Then he straightened and turned directly to where the shotgun leaned in the shadows.

Dow, who had been praying that Hektoen would forget about the shotgun, saw the bearded man give a sudden start and half swing to cover Hadley.

"Keep the hell away from that shotgun and get over here on the other side," he growled.

"You'll have to shoot me, sir," Hadley answered, and reached for the shotgun.

"Damn you!" Hektoen turned a little more and centered his gun dead on Hadley's back.

"Hektoen!" Dow snapped.

It startled the other enough to make him turn his head. And in that moment Dow plunged forward. Hektoen ducked and brought his gun around. Dow's hand shot out and gripped the barrel. He jerked violently as the shot exploded deafeningly in the tunnel. Then the gun was ripped from Hektoen's fingers, and Dow clubbed him on the side of the jaw. Hektoen sagged, then straightened with an effort and stood there shaken, as Dow took the shotgun from Hadley.

"My Colt, Miss Hadley," Dow said. She had already picked it up, and now she slipped it into his holster. "Tucker, grab my rifle. You take Hektoen's gun, Stroud."

Hektoen stood there with his eyes flickering from one to the other.

Stroud said, "I have my own gun."

"Good. Tucker, empty that rifle, quick. Make sure there's no cartridge in the chamber."

"What're you trying to—"

"Just do as I tell you! Stroud, do the same with Hektonen's hand gun."

Tucker said, "What about a gun for me? He made me throw mine down."

Dow did not answer. He was watching Hektoen. "Now you listen," he said. "You're going out there with that rifle in your hands and the Colt in your holster. You'll take the lantern and put it down about ten feet away and stand by it, and then you're gonna yell for Jordine. You hear me?"

Hektoen jerked his head up and down. "Yeah," he said hoarsely.

"When they come up and ask about the shot you just fired, tell 'em you had to shoot me. We're in here unarmed and all they have to do is come in after us. And if you say one wrong word I'll blow you in half with this load of buckshot."

Hektoen drew a ragged breath. "What if they tell me to bring you outside?"

"Just do as I told you and forget the questions," Dow said.

HEKTOEN took the guns. He picked up the lantern. As he edged past the sacks of ore, Dow said softly, "Hadley, you and Hope get back in that cross tunnel. Stroud, you stand here with me. If anything goes wrong, start shooting."

Hope's throaty voice reached him. "Be careful, Dow."

Hektoen was outside, still holding the lantern. He put it down and called, "Hey, Jordine! Sid! I got 'em corraled! Come on in!"

Dow cocked the hammer of the shotgun and waited. He could feel his heart beating against his ribs. They had to believe Hektoen and fall into the trap. And why shouldn't they believe him? Hadn't he warned them less than a half hour ago that Garcia would try to slip out?

There came the sound of cautious steps. Then the sound came from another direction. The outlaws were not coming as a group; they were closing in in a half circle.

The lantern didn't throw much light from the ground. Standing less than a yard from it, Hektoen's shadow was enormous. Dow's gaze shifted from Hektoen. Boots moved forward into the light and closed in cautiously—four pair of boots. The light struck legs, hands gripping rifles, taut faces. And a voice spoke from the darkness, saying what Dow had been sure it would say.

"Who fired that shot?"

"I did," Hektoen said. "Daly tried for his gun and I had to drop him."

"You dropped him, huh?" the voice said, and Jordine walked forward into the light of the lantern. His black eyes swept over Hektoen. "The rest of 'em in there?"

Hektoen hesitated. Dow touched Stroud's arm and shook his head as Stroud edged forward. Jordine's men hadn't closed in enough on the lantern; they were wary, and a sharp command to drop their guns would scatter them.

"Sure they're in there," Hektoen said finally.

"Where are their guns?"

"I tossed 'em out. You'll find a couple right back of that pile of tailing." Hektoen pointed with his rifle.

Jordine stepped back. In a moment he returned with a rifle and a hand gun. Tucker's guns, Dow thought.

"Aren't you gonna ask about your buddy?" Jordine said in a mocking tone.

"I saw him fall from up there when Daly shot him," Hektoen said hoarsely.

"Sure you did," Jordine said. "Too bad about Sid, wasn't it? He was a good man, a square-shooter."

Hektoen didn't say anything.

"Sid never crossed anyone the way you crossed the people in there," Jordine went on. "I don't trust a man who won't play it square."

Hektoen said, "What're you getting at? I helped you fellows. What more do you want?"

"You helped us on account of you wanted a cut of that ore," Jordine said. "But how do we know you won't cross us the way you crossed these people?"

"I just wouldn't, that's all."

Jordine grinned. "I don't think I'll chance it," he said. He raised his rifle to his hip. Hektoen stumbled back and screamed. Jordine fired and Hektoen fell forward and rolled against the lantern, knocking it over. One of the men picked it up. Jordine said, "Let's see what we got, boys."

They all moved forward, still holding their rifles, but that edge of wariness had left them. It had been there because of Hektoen, Dow thought; they had known Hektoen would be killed.

Dow spoke, his voice stinging like a whip. "Throw your guns down, boys!"

He stepped out, Stroud behind him. For a long second the five men stared in stunned silence. Then Jordine shouted, "Get 'em!" and jerked his rifle up. It seemed to Dow that all five men moved at once as he squeezed the trigger of the shotgun.

Most of the buckshot ripped through the shoulder of a man who had started to dart in front of Jordine, but Dow saw from the way Jordine flinched that a few of the pellets had struck where he had aimed. He dropped the shotgun and drew his Colt as Stroud fired twice. Dow took aim at a running man, fired, and saw him stumble and go down.

"Get out of the light, Stroud!" Dow shouted. "Jordine's out there somewhere!"

"Let him go."

"No. I mean to finish this."

He ran at a crouch between the piles of tailing. Jordine had been hit, but not badly enough to drop his rifle. At the blast of the shotgun he had run. He would try for the horses, Dow thought. It was the only thing left for him to do.

Jordine had a good chance of getting away in the darkness, Dow thought, as he ran hard down canyon. He stopped suddenly and listened. There was no doubt about it: somewhere ahead boots stumbled across a boulder.

DOW moved again. He had walked this stretch to the spring so often that he could follow the wheel ruts in the darkness. A gust of wind struck him as he came out of the canyon, and it brought him the sound of hoofs.

"Jordine! I figured to make you run!" he called in a jeering voice.

Hoofs hammered in the blackness.

"Jordine! You turn yellow, boy?"

Out of the blackness there came a rider. Dow had time only to throw himself to one side as the horse galloped past, snorting. Dow raised up and fired.

"Run, rabbit, run!"

Jordine turned back. A gun roared above Dow and a tongue of flame lashed out. Dow fired, aiming above the flash. There came the sound of a solid *thump* as Jordine spilled from the saddle. The horse raced on in the darkness, neighing shrilly.

Dow moved forward cautiously until he could identify the black shape on the ground. He knelt down beside it and heard Jordine's hoarse breathing.

"Did you kill Garcia?"

"Yeah," Jordine gasped. "But I'm thinking you evened the score."

"Not by a long shot. Garcia was worth a hundred like you."

"I'll think about that, when I get where I'm going. So long, Daly. I'll be seeing you." Jordine shuddered and went limp.

"Maybe you will at that," Dow murmured.

In an odd way he admired Jordine more than he did either Tucker or Hektoen. Stroud topped them all, he thought, and Walter Hadley was right up there with him. Hadley, hating violence, had yet understood that there were times when a man must resort to violence himself, or die. And there was Hope . . .

Dow sighed, holstered his gun, and strode back up the canyon. When he came in sight of the cabin, he saw them all gathered outside in the light of the lantern. Tucker hurried to meet him.

"Pay me off and I'll be leaving."

"Not on your life, sonny," Dow told him. "You'll stay and help clean up this mess and make your report to the sheriff just like the rest of us."

Tucker said something in a ragged voice, then walked away as Hope came toward them.

"I was afraid for you." She gripped Dow's arm hard as if she needed to touch him.

"I'm sorry about this rotten business."

"It happened, that's all."

They looked steadily at each other for a long moment. Then Dow smiled. "I think something good might come out of it."

"Yes."

"I don't think we can miss, but I want to be sure. Will you wait?"

"I'll gladly wait," she said, and her smile was radiant.

Dow knew for certain, then, that they couldn't miss. Still smiling, they turned toward the cabin.

Coming up in the next issue

Showdown at Rosilla

Matt Kirby had found the woman he wanted as the mother of his son . . . but the choice made him an outcast among his own people

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By JOSEPH CHADWICK

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Scott knew the murderer of his best friend . . . but proving it was another story, when the killer was a big man like Decker

Beginning an Exciting Serial

By GORDON C. BALDWIN

"You don't really know the woman you're defending," Larry said

OWLHOOT SCHOOL

By Teddy Keller

THE little bell over the cafe door tinkled. Martha Stevens glanced up and shuddered. Now her morning was completely ruined. The pancakes were soggy, she could have patched a saddle with the eggs, could have eaten her coffee with a fork. Now she had to put up with Larry Garrison.

He crossed to her table. A tall, darkly handsome man, he carried himself proudly, knowing that he looked good in the well-tailored gray suit. Without waiting for an invitation, he put his black hat on the table and sat opposite Martha.

"How can you eat that poison?" he asked, frowning at her food.

"Who's eating?" She sipped at the muddy coffee. "I'm starving."

"Why don't you eat at the hotel?"

"You're the banker," she said. "I'm a school teacher."

MARTHA WAS DOING her job the best she knew how . . . but a couple of disappearing pupils can make life mighty hard for a teacher

"At the moment, yes." He studied her, his dark eyes bright with concern. "But you know the people aren't reconciled to you. They wanted a schoolmaster—a man. They don't feel . . ."

"That I'm capable of handling the wild children these people raise," Martha finished. "I know. I've heard that speech at least a dozen times every day I've been in town."

"I'm sorry."

"And I'm sorry too," she said heatedly. "I'm doing the best I can. And I'll do whatever I have to to keep this job."

Larry leaned nearer to her. "I'm sure you will." Sympathy warmed his eyes. "And I'm going to help you."

She pushed her chair back and found herself staring at him. She got slowly to her feet, wondering. Had she misjudged him? She watched him stand, and searched his smile for sham.

At last she said, "Thanks. I'd appreciate it."

Putting a coin on the table, she hurried out. She strode up the boardwalk. Lost in thought, she almost ran into the mayor and the sheriff.

"Morning, Martha," Jim Lane said, lifting his Stetson off his tousled crop of sandy hair.

"Ah, Miss Stevens." Mayor Garrison pasted a professional smile across his face. An older, stouter version of Larry, his stomach attested to years of good eating. He lifted a hand to his head, but didn't raise the black hat. He said, "We were just talking about you."

"I can imagine," Martha said guardedly.

Hooking thumbs into his gunbelt, Jim Lane relaxed his long frame. Even standing on the boardwalk, he had the appearance of being in a saddle.

He said, "Mr. Garrison figures I ought to lock up the Freeman boys."

"Mr. Garrison," Martha said, "you—"

"Miss Stevens." Garrison cut her off sharply, then said; "You've had school going a week now. Every day of that week some merchant has complained of prowling or pilfering on his premises. Every day a Freeman boy has been identified as the culprit. Yet you claim that those boys haven't missed a day of school."

"That's right," Martha said.

Garrison smirked, as though explaining that the world was round. "Would you say that our good merchants are all suffering from hallucinations?"

"I wouldn't say anything," Martha stated, "except that the Freeman boys have been in school every day."

"All of the Freemans?" Garrison asked.

Martha nodded. "All of them."

"Lane," Garrison said, "this leaves me no choice. I insist that you stand guard at the schoolhouse to check on those Freemans until we can find a schoolmaster to replace Miss Stevens."

"Mr. Garrison," Martha fumed, "that's not fair."

"It's entirely fair," Garrison said. "You have proved your complete inability to cope with our problems. The only unfair aspect of this situation is your insistence on covering up for the Freemans."

Jim put a hand on Garrison's arm and said, "Easy, Mayor."

"What are you inferring?" Martha asked coldly. "What do you mean, covering up?"

"The only assumption you leave us," Garrison said, "is that you find it profitable to do so."

Martha swung an open palm at Garrison's face. Jim blocked her. He held her wrist for a moment, smiling at her. Then he released her.

"Mr. Garrison," Martha said, her body rigid beneath her calico dress, "if you wanted a man here you shouldn't have hired me."

"I reckon she's right," Jim said. "Seems to me you owe her a chance."

"I owe her nothing," Garrison said, turning away. "You have my orders, Lane."

"Hold on there, Mayor," Jim said. He waited until Garrison had faced around. Then he said, "I'm a duly elected county official. I'm not obliged to take orders from the town."

GARRISON'S face clouded. "Are you crossing me, Sheriff?"

"I'm reminding you," Jim said. "Reminding you that Martha has her job and I have mine. And if folks'll attend to their own affairs we'll attend to ours."

"So that's it." Garrison stabbed a finger at Jim. "That's why you haven't arrested the Freemans. You're in this deal too."

Jim's eyes widened momentarily. His lean frame stiffened. "Mr. Mayor," he said, "I reckon you've shot off your mouth just about enough for one day. You'd just better high-tail it up to your bank and count your money for a while."

"Sheriff Lane!" Garrison roared.

"Go on," Jim said quietly. "I mean it. You git."

Garrison stood his ground for a moment, like a great bull snorting his challenge. He swung his black gaze from Jim to Martha and back again. At last he retreated a pace.

Turning, he snapped, "I'll have your badge, Lane."

"Good," Jim said. "Then I can go back to ranching."

Anger drained away, and gratitude thrust a lump into Martha's throat. Letting out her tightly held breath, she smiled her thanks to Jim. But the smile he returned was almost impersonal.

"Can't have the teacher being late," he said. "You'd better hurry." He tipped his hat again and angled across the street to his office.

Martha glanced back once as she hurried up the street. He wasn't watching her. And now she had something else to wonder about. It wasn't enough that Mayor Garrison and a certain faction wanted her fired, or that the Freemans continued to do things they couldn't possibly do, or that Larry Garrison, a dandy, had declared himself her ally. Now she wondered about Sheriff Jim Lane.

He had sided her when she needed a friend, had argued her case better than she, had stood up to the mayor. Yet when he faced her there was a chill in those blue eyes. He had become suddenly as distant, as unfathomable as a mirage. And he had walked away.

She shook her head, putting the problems aside, as she unlocked the schoolhouse. And she was almost late. An assortment of children streamed in behind her. Glancing to the clock above her desk, she handed the bell to a small boy.

She sat and waited for the last rush, while the boy rang the bell out on the steps. The Freemans stampeded in together. Tall, spindly lads, all in their mid-teens, they wedged into the desks at the rear of the room.

Martha saw the three enter. She watched them sit. Shaken by her own doubts, she counted them from right to left, from left to right. Any way she looked at them, there were three. She couldn't be mistaken about that. She couldn't tell which was which, though. The same brown hair hung over each forehead, the same wide, dark eyes sparked with deviltry, the same skinny shoulders carried a chip, and the same square jaws dared the world.

Martha kept a casual check on the brothers throughout the day. And she was certain she hadn't been wrong before. Those three boys hadn't missed a day of school; she'd swear it. And by the time school was out she felt confident, sure of herself. She was able to cope with the situation.

She strode happily from the school. She felt almost like skipping along the boardwalk. Humming to herself, she smiled to folks she met. She was just past the bank when Larry caught her. Glancing back, he guided her into the doorway of the mercantile.

"You'd better get out of sight," he said. "Dad's on the warpath."

"He was that way this morning," Martha said, unconcerned.

Larry squeezed into the doorway beside her. "I've got my buggy behind the bank. We'll take a ride till Dad cools off. I know a good place."

"Miss Stevens!"

The mayor's voice rumbled along the street. He stalked toward them. Martha stepped out to meet him. Larry eased aside.

"All right, Miss Stevens," Garrison said, halting, jabbing a finger at her nose. "What do you have to say for the Freemans today?"

"I watched them every minute," she said. "They were never away from school."

"You're lying," Garrison roared. "One of them stole a gun from the hardware store this afternoon."

Martha bristled. "That's not true."

"I've had enough." Garrison advanced a step and shook his finger in her face. "You're not fit to teach our children. I'm going to call

a meeting of the school board. I'll call a special town meeting if I have to. You're through, Miss Stevens."

HE WHEELED around and stomped to the bank. Martha stared after him. Anger blazed up within her, and she wanted to throw something at the man. But there was a cold knot of fear at the core of that rage.

"Don't worry about it," Larry said, putting a hand on her shoulder. "Let's take a drive and forget it."

"No." She shook off his hand, then faced him. "I'm sorry, Larry, but I'm in enough trouble now. If folks saw me courting, they'd run me out for sure."

Larry gripped her shoulder this time, almost caressingly. "Some other time, then." He smiled and moved away.

Martha became aware now of the people watching her. She turned and hurried to the cafe. Taking a back table, she slumped wearily into a chair and buried her face in her hands. A long time later she heard a chair scrape.

"Mind if I sit down?" Jim Lane asked.

Martha could only shake her head.

Jim tossed his hat to a hook on the wall and bent his long body into the chair. "That was quite a run-in you had with the mayor."

"Jim." She paused, straightening her thoughts. "What does he have against me? It's not just the Freemans. He's mean and vicious. What is it?"

"He's a man who's never wrong." Jim signaled a waitress for coffee. "You told him he was wrong, and he doesn't like it."

Martha met Jim's gaze squarely. "Well, he is wrong."

"Are you sure?" Jim grinned and held up a palm as a shield against her anger. "I'm not doubting you, I just wonder. Are you sure beyond any doubt about the Freemans?"

"I counted them," Martha said. "I counted them a hundred times today."

He shrugged. "And it came to four?"

"Four?" Shock opened her eyes wide. "Four Freemans?"

Jim's smile drained away. "Four. What's wrong?"

"Everything," Martha said miserably. "Nobody ever said the two Freemans or the four Freemans or the twenty Freemans. Everybody always referred to them as 'the Freemans.' How was I to know there were more than three?"

"Three?" Jim croaked.

Tears of hurt and humiliation welled into her eyes. She managed to nod.

"They ought to be rawhided," Jim said. "You stood up for them, risked your job and reputation for them." He shook his head. "But nobody can blame you. Even folks who know them well can't tell 'em apart. There're two sets of twins—less'n a year apart."

Sudden anger stiffened Martha, and she banged a fist on the table. "They made a fool of me," she said, "and I helped them. Now it's your turn. Go find them and arrest them."

"If that's what you want," Jim said softly. "You can bet it's what Garrison wants."

"I know." She wilted slowly, sagging against the chair back. She stared at the thick brew in her coffee cup. "They need help. If Garrison has his way they'll go to prison. When they come out they'll really be bad."

"Then what do you want to do? If they're not stopped and made to return what they've stolen, I'll have to arrest them."

"I'll think of something," she said doubtfully. "I've got to."

"Are you sure they're worth the bother?" he asked, shoving to his feet. "Or maybe you just like bucking the big men." He grinned. "Reminds me of a dancehall girl I heard about."

He was gone almost before his words registered. Whirling, Martha stared after him. She hadn't been watching him closely enough when he spoke. What had he meant? Did he know that much about her?

Alone in her dismal room, Martha paced the bare boards. She knew there was only one way to deal with the Freemans. They'd just have to face up to the situation and make their own decision. But how could she deal with Jim?

Did he really know where she came from and what she had done before? He must. His remark was too casually pointed. And maybe others did. That would account for a lot.

She had heard about Jim Lane from the moment she came to town. Folks talked of his bravery, his devotion to duty, his skill with a gun. But mostly they talked of his honesty. Regardless of who was involved or what the law said, he was honest. That's why he had sided her. He had believed in her honesty, had respected her for championing the underdog Freemans. But because he knew of her past, he had been cool socially.

And that's what hurt the most, Martha knew suddenly. Her regard for Jim Lane went deeper than respect or admiration. But now it was clear. Her past stood like a stone wall between them.

SLEEPING fitfully that night, she awoke early. She hurried to the cafe, then to the school house, getting off the street before the town was wide awake. She succeeded in avoiding the mayor, but she had a long wait for her pupils. And while she waited she couldn't suppress a tinge of admiration for the ingenuity of the Freeman boys.

Finally it was time. She stood on the steps and rang the bell. Children swarmed past her. As usual the reluctant Freemans came last. She stepped in front of them, barring their way.

Turning, she called inside, "Start on your spelling lessons. I'll be there in a minute."

"Now," she said, closing the door, facing the Freemans, "where is your brother?"

The three boys stared back at her. Defiance sparked one pair of dark eyes. Another boy chuckled noiselessly.

"You're smart," Martha said. "You figured out that you could pretty well get away with stealing, and I wouldn't know any better than to cover up for you."

Identical smiles wreathed the three good-looking faces.

"Of course you know you've made a fool of me."

The smiles widened to grins.

"And I've had enough. From now on I want four Freemans here."

The grins became laughs.

"I'm not joking."

The laughter increased, sharpened.

"You shut up!" Martha cried. Her outburst shocked them to silence, and she shook a finger at them. "I thought the townspeople were abusing you. I tried to protect you. You made a liar out of me. You jeopardized my job, my reputation, everything. Now I'm through being nice to you. You don't deserve it."

As shock had broken their laughter, now shame blotted the last hint of humor from their faces. They colored and stared at the ground, shuffling their big brogans.

"Well, gosh, ma'am," one of them said at last. "Reckon we didn't figure you to be covering our back trail."

"I won't any more," Martha said.

Another boy spoke. "We've never had anybody help us before."

"That's right," the first said. "Whenever anything happens anywhere around, it always gets blamed on us. We got tired of it and figured we'd give folks something to blame us for."

The third boy met her gaze squarely. "Honest, ma'am, we wouldn't have crossed you if we'd known what you were doing."

"All right," Martha said. "Now you know. What're you going to do about it?"

"Buck," the first boy said, "you high-tail it after Frank. We're all going to school."

Buck raced to his horse and clattered out of the schoolyard. Martha led the way inside. The two Freemans went to their seats. They paid attention. They worked. One of them even recited during the arithmetic lesson.

It was mid-morning when Buck and Frank returned. The four Freemans seemed to fill half the room. Their appearance prompted whispering and snickering among the other children. And Martha felt better. If the businessmen along Main Street had been fooled, their kids hadn't.

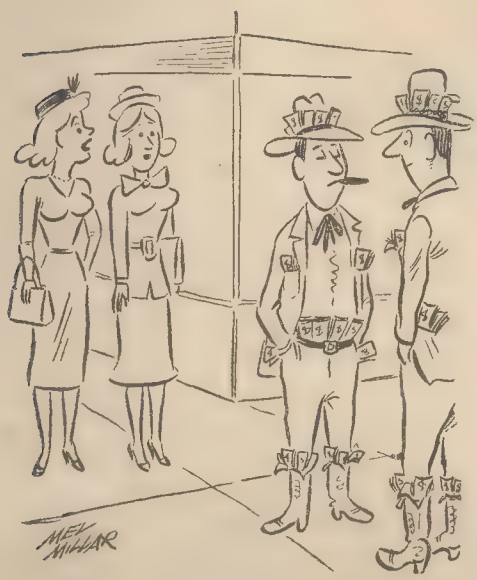
At noon Martha kept the Freemans inside when the others dashed to eat lunches beneath the big cottonwoods. The boys grouped before her desk. Their open faces told the story. They were torn between pride in their accomplishment and shame at having crossed an ally.

"I told you before that you were smart," Martha said. "But this is the smartest thing

you've ever done. There's just one thing more that needs to be done."

Buck—or Frank—said, "You mean we have to take stuff back?"

"Yes." Martha peered around the group. "If you return what you took, even Mayor



"Texans!"

Garrison won't have grounds for complaint."

"What if you hadn't done this?"

"Sheriff Lane would have had to arrest you, and the mayor would have demanded that you be sent to prison."

Four pairs of eyes widened. "How come you helped us?"

"Because I like you," Martha said smiling, "and I don't think you're bad. And because I've been in trouble too. It's no fun to have a town against you."

"It sure isn't, ma'am."

The boys colored again. They squirmed, and stared at their feet. Martha knew they wanted to express gratitude, but didn't know how. Finally it was too painful to watch, so she went on with the instructions.

"I suppose it'll take you awhile to gather things up," she said. "You'd better go now so you can have it all here by the time school's out." She paused, smiling. "And do me a favor. Stay clear of the mayor until this is all straightened out."

LAUGHING, the Freemans ran from the building. Martha sighed and took her lunch from the desk drawer. Regardless of what happened to her now, the Freemans would be on the right side of the law.

The thought sobered her. What would happen to her now? Jim knew of her past, and plainly he was not the only one. That would explain the mayor's hostility. He hadn't just complained about her teaching, he had called her unfit. He had pounced upon something academic and had twisted it into a personal issue. And what of Larry and Jim and the school board?

Too soon, the children came streaming back inside. Martha tried to lose herself in the lessons, but she felt genuine relief when the four Freemans returned. After she had dismissed the others, the Freemans brought her a bulging gunnysack.

"Thank you, boys," she said. "Now you go on home and try to stay out of mischief. I'll see that these things are returned."

The Freemans hesitated. Then, blushing wildly, they mumbled thanks and ran to their horses. Martha watched them till they were out of sight. Then she moved back to her desk, feeling a warm glow of neighborliness.

She worked for an hour, planning lessons, worrying about the children who were having trouble with the multiplication table. Then she lugged the heavy sack to the steps and closed the door. She had the key in the lock when she heard the buggy.

"Hello," Larry called, guiding the horse near the steps. "Looks like you could use some help."

"I certainly could," Martha said, turning. "It's a long walk, and this sack is heavy."

"Climb in."

She tossed the gunnysack to the buggy's floorboards and stepped up. Larry flashed white teeth and tipped his hat. But he hadn't stirred himself to hand her up to the seat. He flapped the reins and guided the horse out of the schoolyard. At the stage road he turned away from town.

"You're going the wrong way," Martha said. She smiled then. "I know it's a nice afternoon for a ride, but it is getting late, and I don't think this is wise for me."

Larry didn't look at her. He said, "I'm tired of your stalling me. I think it's about time you started being nice."

"What are you talking about?" Martha demanded.

He raised an eyebrow and glanced at her. "I overheard some of your pupils talking. They had overheard your conference with the Freemans. I know what's been going on. I know what's in that gunnysack."

"You're not unique," Martha said. "Everybody in town knows."

"But everybody doesn't know where you came from," Larry said. "I was through Pawnee a year ago. I stopped in the Happy Days for a drink." The smile he gave her was not pretty. "I don't think people in town would consider a dancehall girl fit to teach their children."

"What's your game, tinhorn?"

Larry turned off the road and pulled up beside a creek. Facing her confidently, he said, "You want to keep your job. But I have information which would cause certain people to see that you lose your job. Obviously, my silence is valuable to you."

"Maybe I'll take my chances on explaining to those people," Martha said. "I was desperate when I took that job. I have nothing to be ashamed of."

"Of course not. But people are inclined to ask questions later." He leaned back against the cushions. "And many folks would consider you unfit even if you'd been in the Happy Days teaching Sunday school."

Martha set her jaw grimly. "I'll have to chance it."

"But you don't have a chance. A special meeting of the school board's been called for tonight. A few words from me, and you'll be run out of town before morning."

"You wouldn't dare," Martha said hotly. "You couldn't be that low."

Larry chuckled, then laughed aloud. Suddenly he twisted on the cushion. His arms closed around her, hauled her against him. He forced her head back and kissed her.

Martha pounded futilely at his wide shoulders. Then she arched her fingers and gouged at his face. He reared back, cursing. Martha ducked to the gunnysack. Flipping it open, she grabbed the revolver from the Freemans' loot.

"Get this rig moving," she said, thumbing the hammer, leveling the gun at his belly. "Make one move toward me and I'll kill you."

Larry reached for the reins. "I wonder if a woman's ever been tarred and feathered."

"Shut up and drive," Martha warned.

Larry had nothing more to say until he had pulled up in front of the rooming house and Martha had dropped the gun into the sack. Then he said, "Maybe you'll like going back to the Happy Days. If you'd rather stay in town, you can still get in touch with me before the meeting at seven o'clock."

WITHOUT a word, she stepped down from the buggy. Turning, she reached for the sack. Larry kicked it, dumping it into the street. Laughing, he whipped up the horse.

"Nice company you keep."

Martha whirled and saw Jim Lane moving toward her. He tipped his Stetson, then bent and picked up the gunnysack.

"You knew he was like that?" Martha asked. "Why didn't you warn me?"

"Most women don't like to be told," Jim said. "Besides, I didn't want you thinking I was jealous."

"No danger," she said angrily. Then she added, "You can take care of that sack. The Freemans are returning everything."

She whipped around and stalked into the house and up to her room. Locking the door, she paced up and down, letting the anger burn out. This had been almost too much of a day.

She had felt victorious and noble after straightening out the Freemans. But then everything had turned bad. Larry Garrison had tried to take advantage of her position and her past. Jim Lane had made it clear he wasn't interested in her. Now she could look forward to being fired and asked to leave town.

The thought shook her. She didn't want to

go back to the Happy Days. Her job here was a good one. It was worth something to hold onto it. But how much was it worth? It all boiled down to a matter of choice. She could be nice to Larry, or she could return to Pawnee and the Happy Days.

She slumped onto the bed. The problem spun dizzily through her mind. What was it worth to keep her job and stay in town? She didn't know. Pushing up from the bed, she began to pace the floor again. A light rap sounded from the door.

She thought it must be Larry coming to renew his argument. But she asked, "Who is it?"

Feet shuffled outside the door. Finally a voice said, "It's the Freemans, Miss Stevens."

She crossed, unlocked the door, and swung it open. The four brothers grinned at her.

"See," one said, "I told you she was okay."

"What is this?" Martha asked.

The boys flushed and fumbled for words. One said, "We know what kind of jasper Larry Garrison is, ma'am. That's why we followed his buggy—to make sure nothing happened. He didn't hurt you?"

"No," she said. "I'm quite all right."

"That's good," one of them said. He cleared his throat self-consciously. "We figured it out that we've been mad at everybody and everybody's been mad at us just because we're the Freemans. You're the first one who ever treated us decent. We're going to kind of look after you, if you don't mind."

"Mind?" Martha said, smiling. "I'm flattered. I'll bet there's not another woman in the territory with four such handsome protectors."

They had more to say, but now their faces flamed and their mouths worked noiselessly. Muttering, they fled.

Martha closed the door, feeling again that warm glow within her. Whatever happened, there were four people in town who admired and respected the dancehall schoolmarm. And now, she thought candidly, Larry Garrison could go straight to a certain place noted for its heat. She didn't know who to fight or how to fight, or even whether she'd have a chance to fight, but she wasn't through yet.

Striding to the tiny mirror, she tugged a comb through her hair. Then she went downstairs and onto the boardwalk. She was at the door of the cafe when she heard voices across the street.

"I'm telling you," a man yelled, "everything those boys took from my store was brought back today. Jim Lane told me himself that there won't be any more trouble."

"Nonsense, Homer." Mayor Garrison spoke now. "Those boys are bad clear through. That woman's running a school for owlhoots, not children. Sheriff Lane's mistaken."

"I reckon I'll have to take exception to that," Jim said.

From Martha's left, the sheriff angled across the street to the growing group in front of the mercantile. She identified some of the rigs at the tie-rail as belonging to board members. Now the people, sensing trouble, silently watched Jim approach.

"I heard you'd called a school board meeting," Jim said to the mayor. "I didn't figure you'd hold it in the street."

"This is not an official meeting," Garrison said. "Three of us were on our way to the meeting when Homer, here, felt called upon to defend Miss Stevens."

THE stooped, craggy little man from the stable shook a fist in the air. "I go along with Homer. Those boys came right up to me and admitted they swiped a bale of hay. They said they couldn't bring it back because their horses had eaten it, but they'd work out what the hay cost. Anybody who can do that with those Freemans is worth keeping."

"It's some sort of trick," Garrison insisted. "If she's not in with them, why did she lie for them?"

"She didn't know she was lying," Jim said. "Nobody told her there were four Freemans."

Garrison laughed scornfully. "Everybody knows that."

"Martha didn't." There was an edge in Jim's voice.

"Oh," Garrison said wisely, for the benefit of the crowd, "so you're in on it, too?"

"Garrison," Jim growled, "I'll cut your filthy tongue out."

"Hold on there," Larry Garrison yelled.

Martha stared across at Larry elbowing his

way through the crowd. The whole thing had happened so quickly she hadn't known what to do. Now she shrank into the doorway of the cafe. Larry held the lid to her coffin and was ready to nail it down.

Larry sprang up into a wagon and faced the crowd. "Homer, Andrew—even you, Sheriff. I admire you men for defending a woman; you're showing true chivalry. But I'm afraid you don't really know the woman you're talking about."

"Shut up, Larry," Jim snapped.

"You aren't making sense," Homer shouted. "Of course we know her."

"Not as well as I do," Larry said. "Do you know where she came from? Do you know what she did there?"

The words pushed up through Martha's throat. "I was a dancehall girl," she cried.

And then she found herself hurrying across the street, knowing only that she wanted to be honest with those folks who had given her a chance.

"She's proud of it," Larry said, as Martha moved in beside Jim.

In the silent crowd Homer's throat-clearing sounded like the rumble of threatening thunder. But he said, "Reckon a girl's got the right to keep body and soul together."

"Granted," Larry said. "But shouldn't it be an honorable profession?"

Jim gave Martha a brief smile and moved beside the wagon. "You folks wouldn't want to jump to conclusions," he said, "so maybe you'd like to know the whole story." He paused, while people nodded and muttered. "I checked on Martha's background, and I didn't find any reason for her not teaching."

"Why didn't you consult me?" the mayor demanded.

Jim ignored him. "Martha was moving West with her family. A runaway team killed her kid brother. Her parents both took down with the fever. She got 'em as far as Pawnee, but the doctor there couldn't help. Well, when it was all over she owed lots of money. I guess she could have sold the wagon and team and had enough cash to get her a long way, but she stayed and worked and paid off the debt. Folks liked her in Pawnee. They liked her so well that the town marshal and one of his deputies walked her home every night after work. The parson in Pawnee said she's as fine a woman as ever hit town."

"You lie," Larry shouted. "You're mixed up in something with her. She's not fit to teach here. I say let's run her out. Now!"

A wild warwhoop rang along the false fronts. A horse lunged down the street. A rope whirled over the head of the rider. The rope swung out, reached, closed over Larry's shoulders. He shot out of the wagon and pitched into the street. Three figures darted from the shadows. The horseman pulled down hard.

Then Larry was up, freed, and four Freemans bounced him between them.

Turning his back on the fight, Jim Lane glanced to the mayor and rested a hand on his gun. One of the Freemans turned to look at the mayor. Garrison ran toward his bank. People drifted away.

"I'm sorry," Jim said to Martha, "but this is only temporary. You'll have to give up your job next year anyhow."

Her shoulders sagged. Tears brimmed her eyes. She had taken absolutely all she could stand; it would be better to leave now than to look forward for a year to being fired.

She managed to ask, "Why?"

"The schoolboard won't allow it," Jim said, smiling. "They have a rule against women teachers being married."

For just an instant a sweet paralysis froze her. Then she looked up into the laughing blue eyes. Jim's arms went around her, shutting out the memories of Pawnee and the Happy Days, of the school board. She heard the shouts of four Freemans. And then she pushed her face against Jim's shirt front, knowing that her tears were soaking it. But now they were tears of happiness.

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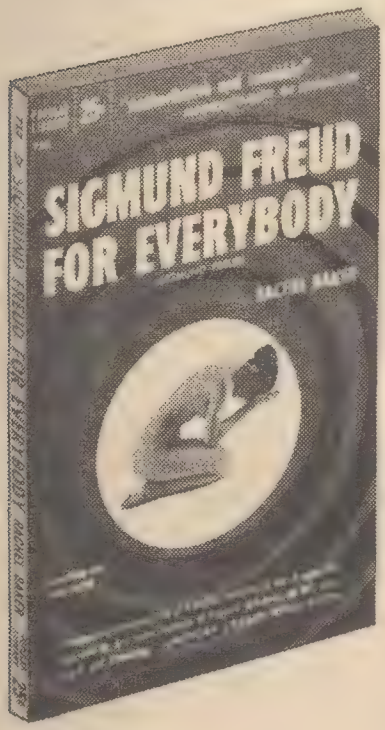

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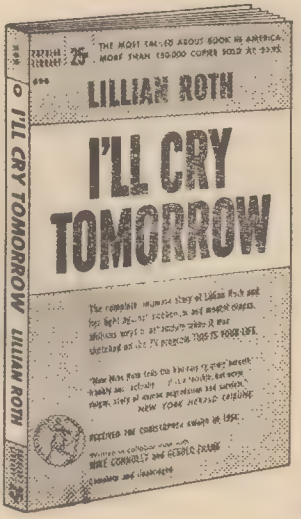

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Louella shot the question at him. "Do you think Blaze is guilty?"

Lynch Law for a Nester

By PAT PFEIFER

RUSS QUENTIN and Burdock were on the same side . . . but now that the fighting had started, it was every man for himself

RUSS QUENTIN was tough as rawhide, but he looked at the body of old Roarin' Sam Reardon and a cold sweat popped out on his body. The rancher's shirt and jeans were torn and scraped to shreds, revealing the raw and bleeding mass of flesh beneath.

It was all too easy to see the picture as it must have happened—Reardon riding through the field of blackened, lava-like boulders, and the rope snaking out, unseen by him, from behind one of the rocks. Then a horse pounding forward at a gallop, Reardon's body struggling, bouncing, at the end of the merciless lariat.

And when finally Reardon had stopped struggling, his killer had callously removed the rope and coiled it meticulously, while he laughed with a mad enjoyment, laughed until a homesteader who had witnessed the killing betrayed his position and ran, with the whine of bullets from the killer's gun.

Quentin's hand touched the rope that now lay looped on his saddlehorn, and he shuddered. He'd picked that rope up from where the killer had dropped it. Now, he turned a gaze edged with a passive dislike on the homesteader.

"So you saw the killing. Why'd you come to me instead of to the law?"

Under that cold glance the man's face turned uneasy. "The sheriff doesn't like homesteaders. You'll be top man here, now that Reardon's dead. And you've never talked against us like Burdock and Reardon and the others did."

Quentin grunted. Give these homesteaders an inch and they took a mile. He had no fight with anyone, so long as they let him and his ranch alone. Unlike Reardon and Burdock, who kept their holdings in the rich valley near Oregon's Blue Mountains by force of strength, he had a deed for every acre of his land. So he was secure from homsteaders, and also from the greed of Reardon and Burdock.

He fingered the loops of the rope, studiously avoiding the red stains left by Reardon's vainly clutching hands, and eyed the silver hondo.

"Know whose rope this is?"

The homesteader, Johnson, shook his head, then stiffened. "I won't lie for anyone who'd kill like that, and try to kill me too. It's Blaze Carmody's rope. He won it in a roping contest. The hondo has his name on the inside."

Quentin nodded, a tinge of contempt in his face.

Carmody was the only one of the homesteaders who were beginning to filter into the valley who had the nerve to settle on some good land, a strip contested by Burdock and Reardon and held by neither. Most of the settlers, like Johnson, contented themselves with the poorer land on the fringes.

Johnson read the look and said with a kind of tattered dignity, "I don't believe in force, or meddling in things, but I don't hold with murder, even of a man like Reardon." Johnson looked down at the body.

"Well, let's get him into Springville to the sheriff's. You can tell Wilkerson what you told me."

WILKERSON was a cattleman's sheriff, and he wasted no time. "Should have run that squatter out a long time ago," he said curtly. "I'll swear you in for the posse, Quentin, and then we'll get Hugh Burdock and some of his men. You'll both come in handy."

Quentin looked at Wilkerson for a long moment. "You're being real impartial, sheriff," he said dryly. "I guess we'll stop off at Q Bar and pick up a couple of my hands, too."

Wilkerson flushed with a weak anger. He did not press the question. Already the lawman expected a battle for Reardon's position, and would play things carefully until he was sure which man, Burdock or Quentin, would win or would make him the best offer.

There was outrage mixed with satisfaction on Hugh Burdock's heavy features when the posse rode into Carmody's ranch yard. Blaze Carmody was working with a rope, flipping his loop uneeringly over the girl who laughed and dodged, but to no avail. Louella Carmody saw the posse first, and her laughter faded into a still fear.

Her brother whirled, his reckless features freezing into a scowl. "You gents want something?"

He watched them, coiling his rope automatically into his left hand, his right wrist giving it that skillful half-twist that straightens out old kinks as the rope is gathered in. In a region with its share of good ropers, Blaze Carmody was noted for his skill, and for being left-handed, though most other people used their right hands.

Hugh Burdock answered him. "You know what we want, Carmody. Are you coming peacefully, or belly down across a horse?"

"You go to hell," Carmody said promptly.

Burdock reached for his gun. Carmody's rope shot out, dropped over Burdock's head, and tightened around his middle. Carmody grinned and pulled, and Burdock toppled from the saddle and into the dust, his gun flying from his grasp. Wilkerson jerked out his gun and aimed it at Carmody.

"One killing is enough," he snapped. "Drop that rope or you're dead."

Louella Carmody ran to his side. "Please, Blaze," she said. "Don't you see they want to kill you?"

Carmody dropped the rope, his eyes still rebellious, and Burdock, white-faced and shaken, struggled to his feet.

Tom MacEwen, Quentin's foreman, poked him in the ribs. "Old beef-belly's scared shiftless," he observed.

Quentin nodded abstractedly. Burdock's face was a picture of abject fear. Then it changed to angered humiliation. His fist came up and caught Carmody in the face, driving him back, against the corral poles, off-balance. He hung there, trying vainly to gain his feet as Burdock punished him with maul-like fists.

The girl screamed, "Stop him! You're the sheriff."

There was a stark plea in her cry that sent Quentin forward. He rode up to the struggling pair and shoved a booted foot at Burdock, forcing the man back.

"You've done enough," he said levelly. "Wilkerson, if you're going to arrest him, do it."

Stung, Wilkerson said, "Carmody, you're under arrest for the murder of Sam Reardon. Come along now. You're getting off lucky."

Carmody swiped at a bloody nose and looked up in astonishment. "You're crazy. I haven't been off my place in a week."

Quentin picked up the rope from his saddlehorn. "This your rope?"

Carmody nodded. "It was stolen. Louella got me a new one yesterday."

Quentin's gaze passed over the girl with no visible emotion. "Sam Reardon was dragged to death with your rope."

Shock played wildly over Carmody's face. Louella said desperately, "But he didn't do it. He was here all week."

Burdock laughed then, with a sneer in it that sent red color into her face. "Of course you'd lie for him."

Now Wilkerson, anxious to show his importance, ordered Carmody to saddle his horse. The girl did not wait. Competently, she roped and saddled a mount, and rode with them. Even the presence in Springville of a knot of Big R riders did not break her composure as the posse entered the main street.

Russ Quentin sensed their ugly mood, and his lips tightened. "Don't let anyone start anything," he muttered to MacEwen, who nodded and passed the word on to Shivers and Allred, the other two Q Bar hands in the posse.

Wilkerson shoved Carmody inside the jail, and only then did Louella Carmody's self-possession leave her. She rubbed an arm across her eyes and stood in indecision for a moment. Quentin, moved by a gentleness he could not explain, went over to her.

Her lips curled scornfully. "You've done your duty as a citizen—and a cattleman!"

Quentin thumbed his hat back and let his eyes travel slowly over her. "A man is what he is," he said at last. "The least he can do is make no unmeant apologies for himself. I suggest you get out of town as soon as you can, miss. You might run into trouble."

HE ANGLED over to where MacEwen waited. His foreman, quiet competence in every moment, pointed with his chin at the sheriff's office.

"Slow Jim just went in and had a look at Reardon. He reminded me of a bee-stung grizzly when he came out. He was so mad he just wants to kill somebody—in fact, anybody."

Slow Jim Mooney was Reardon's foreman, and built like a grizzly, but Quentin did not at the moment appreciate MacEwen's apt description.

"What's Burdock up to, Mac?"

MacEwen spat. "He's bowed down terribly with grief one minute, and urging Slow Jim on to murder the next."

Quentin nodded, and motioned Shivers and Allred over, grateful all at once for the tough loyalty of these riders. "You boys hang around, get the drift of things. Friend Burdock thinks he's making the big tracks in the valley right now."

Shivers grinned sardonically. "He'll find out different. You don't want a hanging, huh, Russ?"

"You get the idea," Quentin said softly. "Especially since, if Burdock got away with it, he might get other notions."

MacEwen grinned with the freedom of long friendship, and walked away. "Especially," his voice came back over his shoulder, "since that Carmody's gal's quite something."

Quentin stared after him and then swore disgustedly under his breath. He'd hardly met the girl until today, and then she'd acted like he was too dirty to have under her feet.

The Carmodys, he thought moodily, meant nothing to him. It was Burdock, with his sly threats against Reardon, his petty squabbling with the old cattle king, who would be dangerous now. Reardon's death would mean that his vast acres, held by force of power, would eventually crumble into smaller ranches—unless someone with the strength to fill Reardon's place came along to take over.

Burdock was priming himself for the taking For an instant Quentin felt the urge to fight him; then he discarded it. The price Reardon had paid, in the ruthlessness that finally brought his death, was too high. Russ Quentin had built the Q Bar slowly, honestly, from the start his parents had made, until now he felt secure in its outer strength. He was beginning to build it inwardly, too, with blooded stock and newer methods. And, he reminded himself wryly, though the idea gave him small comfort, the valley settlers mistrusted him less than they did Burdock.

He pushed into the Here's How and had a drink, listening to the swell of talk around him. It was evident that talk was all that was going on so far.

Quentin lounged out and leaned idly against the side of the saloon. Hugh Burdock came out of the sheriff's office just as Louella Carmody stepped up to the porch accompanied by one of the town's lawyers. He stepped in front of her and Quentin, a cold spark of rage deep inside him, hurried with long strides across the street.

Burdock said something, and reached out for her wrist. She sidestepped deftly, one small fist flashing upward in a blow that rocked Burdock's head back.

Wilkerson grabbed Burdock by the arm as Quentin reached the porch. "Now, Hugh, don't get mad at her because her brother hit you." Burdock, one eye swelled shut, threw off the sheriff's grasp and strode forward, cursing both the Carmodys.

Quentin grabbed Burdock's shoulder wrenched the man into position, and the spark of rage exploded into fury as he smashed his fist into the rancher's face. Burdock staggered backward, and then a look of complete and brutal anger distorted his features. Quentin knew then that this clash was the climax of a long and hitherto hiden antagonism between them.

Burdock rushed him, slamming Quentin's lighter frame off the porch and into the dusty street. Quentin braced both fists as Burdock fell on him, and felt them go deep into Burdock's stomach. Burdock rolled aside, retching deeply, as Quentin got to his feet.

He rushed again, trying to use his superior weight, but Quentin lashed out with a right and then a left, drawing blood. Burdock slowed, and abruptly his fist caught Quentin on the jaw, rocking him back. Burdock pressed his advantage. Quentin did not give way, and they traded punches, fighting with the rage of animals.

Suddenly Burdock lunged and lashed upward with his knee. Quentin rolled aside and the blow landed glancingly, but with a pain that sickened him and drained his strength. He threw his arms up and under Burdock's armpits and locked his hands under the man's chin, forcing Burdock's head back relentlessly, all restraint forgotten in the vast anger that roared in his head.

An aching silence fell, broken only by Burdock's choked breathing. Quentin looked down into Burdock's eyes and the fear-filled agony in them snapped him back to sanity. He released his hold suddenly and ended it with a chopping right.

He stood there for a long minute, numbly aware of the pain spreading through his lower body from Burdock's blow. Then a sick disgust with himself rose until it was almost overpowering. He'd come close to killing with his bare hands.

"Great Jehosephat." It was Wilkerson, who looked at Burdock's sprawled figure and then at Quentin, fear in his eyes. "You—you could have killed him."

Quentin grimaced and picked up his hat. "You'll put a guard out at Carmody's to protect the girl?"

Wilkerson spread his hands. "Now, that won't be necesary, Mr. Quentin. Hugh won't be in shape to do anything now. Besides, he was mad at the nester."

Quentin turned to the girl, who stood frozen

on the porch. "Your lawyer can see your brother. We'll take you home."

She was plainly afraid of him, and he resented the fact that this had the power to hurt him. But she forced her gaze to meet his.

"I'd like to talk to him for a minute."

"Don't make it too long. Wilkerson, you and Smithers stay out here till she's done."

Wilkerson started a weak protest, then glanced down at Burdock and his words died away.

THE Q Bar men got their horses and rode out of town in a compact bunch, Louella Carmody in their midst. As they passed the sheriff's office, Hugh Burdock had risen to his feet. His features twisted into a black mask of hatred as he followed their progress down the street.

MacEwen pulled up at the fork in the road. One branch led north to the Carmody place, the other to Q Bar.

"Russ, do you really think that side-stepping sheriff will put a guard around her place?"

Quentin scowled. His body was throbbing with pain. "Do you think Burdock'd bother her?"

Mac snorted. "Are some horses studs?" He looked at the girl and mumbled, "Excuse me, miss."

She managed a smile. "I think I'll be all right at home," she said. "But thanks for your help."

Quentin straightened decisively. "You'd better come out to Q Bar." Her eyes widened with fear, and it angered him unreasonably. "You'll be safe there. No woman's ever been harmed in my house."

Her head came up angrily at the scarcasm in his voice and she said crisply, "I'm not afraid of you, Mr. Quentin, or of Burdock either."

"Thanks for lumping us together," he snapped, and rode up beside Mac, who grinned. "Shut up," he growled to his foreman.

"I never said a word," MacEwen protested. His grin widened.

As always, Quentin's inner unrest faded as the Q Bar ranchhouse came into view. It sat on a low hill at the south end of his land, overlooking the valley, clean and white in the afternoon sun. He looked at Louella Carmody and felt a swift pride at her interest. The Q Bar might be a bachelor spread but there was no makeshift, rundown seediness about the home buildings, thanks to the care given it by the Hoskins, an elderly cowpuncher and his wife who acted as handyman and housekeeper respectively.

He turned his horse over to the wrangler who came for it and helped the girl down, being meticulously circumspect. She looked relieved when he introduced her to Mrs. Hoskins, who clucked wrathfuly over the whole situation and led her into the house, one arm around her shoulders.

It took an afternoon of Mrs. Hoskins' company, and dinner that evening, before some of the tenseness left Louella Carmody. Quentin stood in front of the fireplace in the large living room, a long and silent figure in the flickering light.

"I haven't thanked you, really, for your help, or apologized for the trouble I'm putting you to," Louella said suddenly.

"No trouble," he denied. "Burdock and I both looked forward to that fight. It had to come sooner or later."

"Do you think Blaze is guilty?" She shot the question at him, and he countered with one of his own.

"You said you were with him all the time. Couldn't he have sneaked away and done it without your knowing?"

Her hands twisted in her lap, and she said in a low voice, "It's possible." She looked at him and rushed on, "He's just not the kind of person who'd kill a man that way and laugh while he did it. Oh, he might kill someone in a fight, but it would be that way, not from ambush, and not—" her voice broke to a whisper—"not with his rope."

Reluctantly, Quentin nodded. He had the feeling of being dragged into this fight by something beyond his control. "Your brother is hotheaded, but I wondered about that. It's more the kind of thing that Burdock would do."

"Someone did steal Blaze's rope," she said earnestly. "It was a prize in a roping contest, and Blaze was proud of that hondo. You know there aren't many left-handed ropers, and

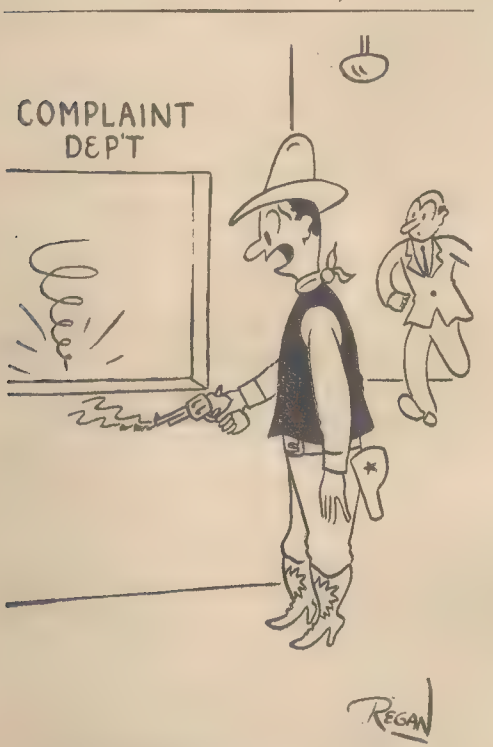
that made winning mean more to him."

Some corner of Quentin's mind was trying to pin down an impression that had to do with that rope. It was annoyingly elusive and he wrestled with it for a moment, then let it slip. Louella was talking again.

"Be careful, won't you? Burdock will never forgive you for that beating."

He crossed over to her chair. "Would that worry you?"

She met his eyes. "I thought before today



"That's strange—it wouldn't fire before!"

that you were like Burdock, maybe even worse. I was wrong."

Quick pleasure stirred him and was suppressed by his habitual self-sufficiency. "Were you?"

Her nearness set off a turmoil in him, and his arms shot out and pulled her up to him, his mouth hard on hers. She stiffened, and he pulled her closer, and then her lips softened and responded to his. She was the answer to loneliness and the cold years. When at last he raised his head, her eyes were soft in the firelight.

"Louella."

He bent his head again and she traced the line of his jaw with her fingers, shaking her head. "I'm still a nester, Russ. And you're what you are—a cattleman. Remember?"

She ran up the stairs and he watched her go, her last words, recalling his words that afternoon, still in his ears.

HE WAS still sitting in front of the fire when MacEwen came in on the run. "Russ, there's a lynching brewing in town."

Quentin grabbed his gun, scooped a rifle off a rack. "Get the crew rousted out. Then give me the lowdown while we wait for them to saddle up."

He went back inside, in answer to a call from Mrs. Hoskins. Louella was with her. "Trouble in town," he snapped. "Keep Louella here."

MacEwen was waiting on the porch. "One of Burdock's riders brought the word. He said Burdock is talking it up."

Suspicion crowded into Quentin's mind. "Why'd one of Burdock's men come to tell us?"

Even in the dim light MacEwen's shrug was eloquent. He said the rest of the crew is so liquored up they don't care, but he doesn't like hangings, even homesteader's hangings. It was that Texas feller who looks like he has a sheriff on his backtrail. He said he was riding on out tonight."

Riders were galloping up in a flurry of haste, and there was no more time for conjecture. Quentin took the reins, swung into his saddle, and rode over to where Louella stood.

"Don't worry. We'll get there in time, and we're bringing him back with us. He's not guilty."

She put her hand on his thigh. The warmth grew and spread through him. "Why have you changed your mind?"

He considered it, knowing that, while she had been the cause of his interfering, now it had gone beyond personalities. People, little or big, had the right to live honestly and without fear.

"I don't like to be pushed around," he told her.

She smiled up at him and said, "Be careful, Russ. God keep you safe."

When Quentin's men got to town there was a sullen mutter of many voices, and the saloons were full of Big R and Burdock men. Quentin slid to a stop and motioned his men closer.

"Stay out of sight and watch. If trouble starts, drift in on the edge of the mob where you can cover them. Mac, let's go to the sheriff's office for a minute."

Quentin stopped in the shadows. "Mac, this smells. Burdock wants me in town for some reason. He'll expect us to circulate around, so we'll go to the sheriff's office and stay inside."

Wilkerson sat alone in his office, his unsteady hand pouring a drink into a tumbler. It was obviously only one of many. From the cell at the back, Carmody was damning the lawman with frantic thoroughness.

Quentin grinned tightly at the homesteader's language and said, "You're right, Carmody. I think the sheriff wants to see you lynched."

"That's not so," Wilkerson said with drunken gravity. "I'll fight till I'm overwhelmed by superior forces."

MacEwen took out his gun, pointed it at a suddenly frightened Wilkerson and said softly, "Consider yourself overwhelmed, Sheriff."

Quentin went through the sheriff's pockets, then his desk. "Where are the keys?"

Wilkerson sniggered, then howled as the gun barrel tapped his head. He looked at MacEwen and Quentin, and the gun in MacEwen's hand descended again. Wilkerson cowered down in his chair, sobered by fear. He babbled out that he'd hidden them behind the picture on the wall so he couldn't be blamed when Burdock led a mob of Big R hands to lynch Carmody.

Quentin grimly hauled Wilkerson up and over to the cell. "Carmody, we're going to leave for a minute. Can you keep the sheriff quiet?"

Carmody grinned wolfishly. "Just give him to me, Quentin."

MacEwen swung the door open and Carmody's hands shut off Wilkerson's bellow for help. The homesteader grinned above Wilkerson's purpling features. "I'll take good care of him."

A few minutes later they were back, with a reluctant Hugh Burdock between them. Quentin removed his gun from Burdock's ribs.

"You've got a nerve," Burdock blustered, his eyes darting uneasily around the room.

Carmody laughed with pleasure as he got up off his bunk and off the sheriff's stomach. "My cup overfloweth," he said. "Put him in here, too. Better yet, I'll come out."

Quentin shook his head. "You stay in there so things'll look normal, but cover up Wilkerson. If anyone comes in we'll say we're watching the prisoner while the sheriff stepped out."

Burdock licked his lips. His face was pasty white. "I don't know what this is about, Quentin, but I don't like it."

"Neither do I," Quentin snapped. He stood over Burdock, a silent menace in his position, eyes frigid. "You want Carmody lynched, and not because you loved Sam Reardon like a brother, Burdock. I think you had something to do with that. And I also think you wanted me in town tonight to get me out of the way, too. Now, if something happens, you'll get it first."

He told MacEwen to keep Burdock covered, and went over to the window, pulling the blanket aside. A knot of men stood in front of the saloon, gesturing angrily toward the jail, then went back inside.

QUENTIN idly picked up the rope with the silver hondo from Wilkerson's desk. The thong he had knotted about the coils was still there and he untied it, then slung the loop out along the floor. It made a slithering sound and Burdock jumped, his eyes staring in morbid fascination as Quentin coiled the rope up again, the coils fitting smoothly into his left hand. Burdock's hand reached up to his neck, his breathing loud in the room. Quentin watched him, automatically taking the loop in his right hand for another toss, then froze. He switched the loop to his left hand and stared at the hondo.

He whirled on Burdock. "Why'd you kill Sam Reardon, Burdock?"

Burdock quivered, his face going slack with surprise. "Kill Reardon? You're crazy!" His voice rose to a shout. "That nester killed him, Quentin. You're a cattleman, you know I wouldn't— We have to stick together!" The last was a plea.

"Shut up!"

Quentin took a step forward, then his anger hardened into purpose. He threw the rope out once again and brought it in slowly. Burdock watched wildly, only the threat of MacEwen's gun holding him in the chair.

"This rope was coiled up like this in the road where the killer dropped it, Burdock. The thong I tied it with was still on it just now. The loop's on the right side of the coil, loose end to the left."

Carmody's face was streaked with sweat, his hands straining at the cell bars.

"A right-handed roper, like me—or you, Burdock—" Quentin smiled humorlessly—"takes the coils in his left hand, throws the loop with his right, the hondo end of the rope pointing away from him. Here, Carmody." He gave the rope to the homesteader. "You throw it."

Carmody, his eyes alive with a new hope, reached for the rope, taking the loop in his left hand, the coils in his right. His eyes rose to Quentin and then passed on to Burdock and settled there with an undying hatred.

"I can't throw this rope lefthanded, Quentin. I'd have to throw it out to take the kinks out and recoil it the other way. The hondo's the wrong way, toward me, for me to use."

"And with you out of the picture, I think a jury would convict Burdock pretty fast, once people get to remembering the threats he's made about Reardon. I guess Burdock got to remembering he should have hung onto that rope to recoil it again, and tried to help things along by lynching you."

To the surprise of the men around him, Burdock began to laugh, a high-pitched, almost maniacal laughter that made them remember the homesteader's frightened description of the killer. Burdock slowed, then leaned forward, eyes gleaming.

"What's your price, Quentin? Wilkerson won't talk and you can shut up your foreman. We can have the whole valley now, between us!"

Russ Quentin stared at the man with a feeling of distaste that deepened into physical disgust. "I'd sooner pick up a rattler than have anything to do with you, Burdock."

Burdock stiffened in his chair, hands gripping the arms. Then the door opened and the man from Texas poked his head in. "Boss, I looked all over town for that Quentin, and couldn't line my sights on him."

Burdock flung himself from his chair. "He's here, you fool. Shoot him!"

His body rolled into MacEwen's feet and knocked him sprawling, but MacEwen snapped a shot at Texas that sent the man reeling backward out the door before Burdock grabbed the gun from his hand. Quentin dove for the floor, feeling for his .45. He got it out and raked the floor in Burdock's direction, as the man rolled behind the end of the desk in front of the cell. Carmody crouched for shelter as the bullets whined into his cell.

Quentin and MacEwen hugged the floor. Burdock snapped a shot around the corner of the desk and laughed as Quentin's gun clicked on an empty. Quentin reached for loads, cursing himself for being fool enough to forget the Texan. He was cramming the shells in as Burdock rose to his feet, a grimace of triumph on his face.

HELPLESSLY, Quentin looked behind Burdock and saw Carmody noiselessly hitching over to the cell door. He rose to his knees, then shook his head and lunged forward as Burdock took careful aim. Then Burdock's feet flew from under him and his shot went up in the air as he sprawled on the floor.

"Rush him now," Carmody yelled, and MacEwen and Quentin dove forward and landed on Burdock. MacEwen grabbed his gun back and belted Burdock over the head with it.

Quentin got to his feet and stood there, weak with reaction, looking down at Burdock who lay with his feet tangled in the rope he had used to kill Reardon with. Carmody grinned weakly.

"I was going to slam the door open on him, but the damn thing opens in. Good thing I saw that rope."

Quentin raised his eyes to the homesteader,

still holding the ends of the rope in his hands. "Thanks, friend," he said very quietly.

"Same to you, friend," Carmody said shakily.

"If you're through with the password, brothers," MacEwen broke in sardonically, "You'd better get ready. They're coming."

The wave of noise, that was many voices, grew closer. MacEwen broke open the sheriff's gun rack and gave Carmody a rifle. Quentin remembered the sheriff. He went in and removed the sock Carmody had shoved into the lawman's mouth, cut him loose, and shoved him out of the cell.

Carmody dumped Burdock inside and locked the door.

"Here comes your lynch mob," Quentin grated. "Now you're going to tell them the truth, Wilkerson, or we'll see they get you and Burdock to hang."

Wilkerson took one look at the grim faces behind him and faced the mob. His voice quavered as he began the story. The men below listened, and when one or two of the sober voices asked a sharp question, they were convinced. Slow Jim Mooney nodded to himself, then pushed forward.

"I came to hang somebody," he rumbled. "It may as well be those two."

Quentin and MacEwen looked over the crowd, spotting their men, but the answer came from an unsuspected source. A tattered little man with a double-barrel shotgun spoke for the circle of homesteaders that had drifted quietly into town.

"Any hanging will be done over your dead bodies," the nester observed mildly. "Us homesteaders are through being pushed around. Now git."

The would-be lynchers looked long at the guns, took notice of the Q Bar hands, and slowly melted away. Carmody took Wilkerson back inside. Johnson, the man who had spoken for the homesteaders, went in with him.

Quentin said slowly, "They meant it, Mac. They're through being pushed around."

"Now more will keep coming, Russ. Burdock's and Reardon's spreads will be cut down considerably—back to their deeded sections—when these fellers decide to move in to good land."

Quentin shrugged.

"Can't blame them any, Mac. They have rights, too."

He watched as Blaze Carmody rushed past him and met Louella. Her face was filled with happiness. Quentin went up to them, tapped Blaze on the shoulder, motioned him aside. Louella's eyes darkened, and he remembered her throwing his words back at him.

"I told you once that I didn't make unmeant apologies," he said. "But a man can change his outlook. I apologize for being narrow minded, but one thing I'll never apologize for—to anyone—is loving you."

She came into his arms eagerly then, her lips raised to his. Vaguely, as from a great distance, he heard Blaze Carmody saying, "Well I'll be—"

Reluctantly, Louella drew back. "Blaze," she said firmly, "Go plow a furrow. We're busy."

Blaze went.

RANCH FLICKER TALK

Next issue—a review of 20th Century Fox's

The Bottom of the Bottle

with JOSEPH COTTON, VAN JOHNSON and RUTH ROMAN

Plus an illustrated personality sketch of STERLING HAYDEN

Grand Lady of Alaska

COURAGE and determination are not monopolized by men. Harriet Pullen proved this during the Klondike gold rush. With her back to the wall, she successfully fought the fierce elements of the frozen North to keep her small family together.

The story of her adventures begins in 1897, off the Skagway coast in Alaska, when she rowed a tiny boat out to a steamer anchored a half mile offshore. Harriet Pullen was a good-looking young woman, deep of bosom, upright, and above average height, with thick long red hair.

"What can I do for you?" the mate asked, running his eyes over her figure in a calculating way.

She handed him a paper. "You have seven horses belonging to me. They were shipped from Seattle."

"Yes, that's right. We've been wondering how you're going to get them ashore. The captain wants them off in a hurry."

Harriet Pullen was in a tight spot. She loved her horses. She had trained them ever since they were weaned from their mothers. "The horses will have to swim," she said. She outlined her plan. "I'll go back to the boat. You lead the horses to the edge and leave the rest to me."

As the first horse was led to the edge of the ship, it balked and drew back. But after much persuasion from Harriet and pushing from the ship's mate, the horse jumped over the side into the sea.

Harriet Pullen, battling the heavy waves grimly,

a true story by Fred Harvey

tied a rope into the horse's halter ring. She snubbed the rope to the boat and started for shore. There she tied the horse up at her cabin and went back for the others. When they were all safely at her cabin she fed and watered them, then went back for the harness. A shock awaited her. It had been stolen.

For a while afterward Harriet rented out her horses to make enough money to buy more harness. Later she hoped to pack freight and provisions. The rates were high enough so she would soon be able to send for her children.

Harriet Pullen had first come to Skagway about three months earlier with only a few dollars in her pocket. She was alone, and the unfriendliness of the people frightened her. Necessity had brought her there. Her husband had died, leaving her with three boys and a girl to support. Her ranch, home, and stock went to pay debts. All that remained were the seven horses she had raised from colts.

"Go to Alaska," she was told. "There's plenty of work there."

She followed this advice, but the dreariness of the cold, rain-swept land, and the selfishness of the gold crazy people, were enough to make her wish she had stayed home. Her children were depending on her, though. They had remained with friends in Seattle till she could send for them.

One day, unhappy and worried, she strolled down to the dock, thinking over her problems. Confusion reigned everywhere about her. Stacks of provisions were piled high in complete disorder. High-booted men cursed their horses, dogs, and pack animals as they waded through the sticky mud. Mackinawed men with packs strapped to their backs staggered over lumber and building materials, anxious to be on their way up the White Pass Trail to the gold fields.

As she stood miserably, not knowing what to do or where to go, a man came up and asked, "Can you cook?" She nodded. "All right, you've got a job. Come on." And he took off without a backward glance toward a huge pile of provisions stacked on the beach.

"My danged cook took off up the trail," he explained. "The grub's in this tent," he said, pulling aside a flap. "The other tent is where the men eat. There are about twenty of them. They'll be as hungry as bears when they get here. Give them plenty to eat and make it hot."

Inside the tent, cured meats hung from poles, sacks of dried beans and fruits lay where they had been dumped. On the stove a pot of burned beans sat where the last cook had left them. The dirt floor was littered with trash. On the dining table lay the remnants of a previous meal. It sickened Harriet and she wanted to leave. But the thought of being able to have her children with her again urged her on.

Vigorously she set about her task. She washed the dishes and scoured the pots and pans with sand, then cleaned the tent. When the place began to look livable, Harriet cooked a huge meal of meat, potatoes and apple pie.

When the hungry workers came in, they were pleasantly surprised to find a woman cook, and a pretty one at that. They had never tasted so well-cooked a meal, either, they claimed. Their sincere compliments made Harriet feel at home.

AFTER several months of cooking she had saved enough to send for her children. From then on she was busy from sun-up to sundown. She cleaned her small cabin till it was neat and shining as a new pin, and made furniture from boxes and wood salvaged from the beach.

To earn more money, she made dried apple pies after working hours, and sold them. Her financial affairs became brighter. Soon she decided to start the business venture she had in mind for a long time, hauling freight. Personally driving her wagon, she became the only woman freight hauler on the trail.

The White Pass Trail was dangerous, but Harriet tackled its terrors as determinedly as she had faced all her other problems. Up narrow, winding canyon walls she drove her pack train. There was barely enough room to travel, and the trail was slick and perilous. She had to follow a slow, crawling mass of men and animals.

Many accidents occurred, stalling traffic all along the trail. Men and animals stood freezing, but unable to go on till the obstructions ahead were cleared up. Those who fell exhausted and died were pushed aside, and the

strong fought it out for survival.

In the spring of 1898 the White Pass Railroad laid track. Prospectors and miners went by rail to the river, then by ship to the Yukon and the Klondike. Harriet Pullen and the other freighters were put out of business. Still struggling to support her children, Harriet looked for another way to make money.

One day she noticed a big vacant house and lot. That would be just right for a hotel and boardinghouse, she thought. She rented it, but didn't have enough money to buy furniture. She went to a man who intended to open a dancehall, and so had furniture he wasn't using yet. He agreed to rent the furniture if Harriet would take him as a boarder.

Even before she moved into the building, all the rooms were rented. Her fame as a cook had spread across the icy wasteland, and she had more guests than she could handle.

But trouble struck again the following year, when the man from whom she had rented the furniture decided he wanted it back. That placed Harriet in a tough position. Her houseful of guests would not like it. All she really owned were the mattresses and bedding.

Still she refused to give up. The next day she ordered lumber and hired carpenters. Before that night a homemade bedframe, chair, and dresser, were in every room. It was a roughtly put together job, but the guests cooperated and did not complain.

Years later Harriet Pullen built a larger hotel with good accommodations. To this day the Pullen House is one of the better known hotels of the North, a tribute to a gallant and courageous lady with the determination to see things through.

KNOW YOUR WEST

1. Soldiers at frontier forts in Wyoming and Montana were sometimes called swaddies, waddies or poddies?

2. Which required more expert skill in freight wagon days, driving a ten-yoke ox team or a ten-span horse or mule team with a jerkline?

3. True or false: unlike cattle, buffalo get up front feet first.

4. The area usually called the Colorado Plateau, noted for uranium as well as petrified bones of prehistoric monsters, lies partly in what other three states?

5. Laton B. Huffman was a famous frontier freighter, faro dealer, or photographer?

6. A gal-leg spur is (1) a light spur for cowgirl use, (2) a spur whose shank is shaped like a girl's leg, or (3) a spur without a rowel?

7. Can you name three of the 17 "frontier fictioneers," members of Western Writers of America, some of them contributors to RANCH ROMANCES, whose stories appear in "The Fall Roundup," WWA's 1955 anthology of best Western short stories?

8. Is a cattle oiler (1) a man who combs and oils the hair of cattle for the show ring, (2) an oil soaked device of rope or burlap-covered cable for range cattle to rub on, or (3) a cowboy who feeds cattle oily cottonseed cake?

9. If a cowboy "got off to feel of his shadow," what happened?

10. At Old West cowboy dances, wax candles were often used for what purpose besides light?

—Rattlesnake Robert

You will find the answers to these questions on page 98. Score yourself 2 points for each question you answer correctly. 20 is a perfect score. If your total is anywhere from 16 to 20, you're well acquainted with the customs and history of the cow country. If your total score is anywhere from 8 to 14, you will have things to learn. If you're below 8, better get busy polishing up your knowledge of the West.

With the first twitch of Charlie's arm, Mark's gun roared

MARK'S FATHER sent him West

for his health . . . with orders to get well . . . or to die with his boots on

The Violent Cure

By SAM BRANT

MARK HOLDRIDGE guided the buckskin stallion down into the gulley. Then he swung from the saddle and stood for a minute soaking in the hot sun. Squinting out over the barren land, he pictured, on the bank opposite him, a softly lighted ballroom, muted violins, and lovely girls in swirling, flowing gowns. And he saw himself with those girls, saw his pencil-thin frame filled out and decked in evening clothes, saw the girls admiring his prairie tan, the boyish tousle of his black, curly hair.

He opened his eyes, struggling. How much longer would he have to stay here? A tremor ran through him. He felt his thin face crinkling into a boy-with-a-new-pony grin. Choking down a wild urge to whoop, he though back.

He hadn't coughed in . . . why, it must've been two weeks. And in the past week he'd eaten like six bears just awakened from hibernation. He remembered that only this morning his belt had felt snug when he dressed. He yanked up his shirt sleeve and examined his arm. It was skinny, yes, but no longer emaciated.

And then he did let out a whoop. He'd done it. He was getting well. He had whipped the

consumption that had sent him west. He could send one of the men to town to wire his father, and tomorrow he' be on his way.

He sobered momentarily. Before he left, he'd show that smart Charlie Blake that a man didn't have to be born in the West to know how to handle a gun. Mark had ridden to that gulley when he could barely lift his six-shooter. Now he'd show them what a *healthy* man could do.

Stooping, he scooped up several rocks. One at a time, he tossed them out and up. The motions were automatic now. His hand flicked down, closed, pulled, thumbed, squeezed. The gun bucked, and a rock shattered in mid-air.

Mark emptied the gun, missing once. Habit pushed him back from the black smoke as the breeze carried it down the gulley. Once, when he was still very ill, the smoke had caught him, its acrid sting searing his raw lungs, and he had barely gotten to his horse.

Reloading, he scooped up more rocks. Then he stopped. He hadn't time for shooting games; he had plans to make. He had to pack, he had good-bys to say. This time tomorrow he'd be on the train.

Swinging into the saddle, he whooped, touched rowels, and the buckskin lunged up onto the rolling prairie. He was going back; he could think of nothing else. Bending low, he put the stallion into a full gallop, and held him there.

He saw the front screen door open as he pounded up the drive. Recognizing Nell Rawlings, he whooped again. Then he was pulling down hard, leaping from the saddle, and sprinting up the porch steps. In that instant he burned up the last ounce of his meager strength.

"Mark Holdridge," Nell scolded as he slumped to the steps, "don't you have any sense at all?"

He lay there a moment, gasping for breath. Then, grinning, he shoved to a sitting position.

"If I ever play nurse again," Nell said, tapping a foot angrily, "I hope the patient is a sick cow. Men!" She groaned, and spread her hands in exasperation.

Mark smiled at her. He would remember her like this—angry enough to put color deep in the soft planes of her face, impatient enough to pencil wrinkles above her ridiculous pug nose, and yet with enough humor to kindle a spark behind her wide, green eyes.

"Nell," he said, "I'm getting well."

She bent to touch his forehead with the back of a strong hand.

"You mean it's turned to brain fever."

"I mean it." He gripped the post and hauled himself to his feet. "The cough is gone. I'm putting on weight. I'm getting well. Now I can go home."

He broke off, fumbling. Something blocked him. He couldn't tell her that he was free to go back East. He stared at her, puzzled, wondering at the quickening of his already heavy breathing.

She blushed under his gaze, and turned away. "Charlie brought in the mail," she said. "There's a letter from the colonel."

SHE hurried into the house. Still weak, still puzzled, Mark followed her. He picked the letter off the cherry table and dropped into the leather chair. Gazing at the address in the colonel's bold hand, he thought of the surprise he had for his father.

The letter read:

"According to the prognostications of this fool doctor, you should be well on the road to recovery by now. I have no doubt but that even now you are awaiting my permission for your return. You are eager to resume your rounds of dancing with these dull daughters of inherited wealth, of drinking with the scum sons of bored society, of gambling with the leeches who prey on fools, of living a thoroughly useless life.

Well, I won't have it. You were too young to be straightened out by the war. My position made it too easy for you to become a wastrel. The military and my holdings left me no time to be a father. I accept my responsibility for your failure to become a man. But I won't do so much longer. Apparently the frontier is my only hope of seeing you grow to maturity and usefulness.

As you know, I bought that Teapot Ranch on speculation. I know nothing of the cattle business—that's why Teapot is small. But I am a businessman. The ranch is not making money. I want to know why. I expect you to find out. I trust no one, I distrust no one. I have no clue to the failure. It's up to you.

When you have put Teapot on a paying basis, when you have doubled the herd from what it was when I bought three years ago, when you have justified your own existence, then you may inquire about returning East. Until that time, I shall have my will read in

favor of your cousins and of certain charities.
Sincerely,
Your father"

Anger boiled through Mark, shoving him up from his chair. What right had his father to say such things, to dictate Mark's way of life? What right had he to judge his son a failure in life, to exile Mark to more living in this empty land?

"Howdy, sick boy."

Mark turned to the front door. Charlie Blake stood framed there, a scornful smile on his round face. He thumbed back his hat and strode into the room. Only then did Mark see Nell following the foreman.

"Hear tell you're feeling better," Charlie said, rubbing at his stubbly chin. "Reckon you must be getting stronger. You wear that gun like a real man."

"I'm man enough to use it on a sidewinder like you," Mark said.

Charlie bristled, his smile draining off. "Keep running your lip like that, sick boy, and you'll get the chance."

"Charlie!" Nell said, stepping forward. "Mark! Stop it. Charlie, we didn't come here to fight. If you want to tell him about us, get it said."

"Us?" Mark echoed.

Charlie's smile returned, triumph mingled with the scorn. "Since you're getting along so well, we figure you can do without us altogether pretty soon. So Nell and I are gonna leave you, in a month or so. I'm gonna drop my rope on her."

Mark felt himself gaping, felt that same puzzlement twisting his stomach. He shouldn't care, but he did. Shifting his gaze to Nell, he asked, "Is that right?"

She clasped her hands and stared at him. She only nodded.

Her admission stung Mark, cut him deep. There was no reason why it should, yet this, piling on top of him right after the letter from the colonel, was too much. He felt his shoulders jammed against the wall, found himself facing the world alone.

"You'll leave when I say you can," he told Charlie.

The foreman got his back up. "What're you trying to tell me?"

"I've got my orders from the colonel," Mark said, "and you won't like 'em any better than I do. I want to see every tally book, every record of any kind you have that's connected with the business of this ranch. And I want you around here until we get things straightened out."

"My, my," Charlie said, "doesn't the sick boy talk big, though? Why, he's even gonna try to run a ranch."

"I'll run it," Mark said, "and I'll run it to show a profit."

Charlie scowled. "Watch your talk. I may just decide I've been here long enough."

"You leave," Mark warned, "and you'll forfeit any pay due you."

"Why you mangy little greener," Charlie roared.

"Charlie!" Nell snapped. "You know you'll have nothing coming if you up and walk out."

"I'm not leaving," Charlie said, "but it's because I'm not ready. If I wanted to go, I'd beat my pay out of sick boy's hide."

Mark faced Nell a moment, wanting to convey his thanks for her shutting Charlie up. But she wouldn't meet his gaze. To Charlie, he said, "I want all the records in by supper time."

He turned quickly and crossed to his room. The door slammed behind him a second before his knees buckled. He managed to lurch toward the bed, and sprawled there, completely exhausted. But his mind whirled on, prodded by anger and disappointment and hurt. Abruptly the confusion settled.

At last Mark knew why he couldn't tell Nell about going back East. He knew why he resented the thought of Nell and Charlie. He had been trapped by a lair as old as medicine. He had fallen in love with his nurse.

CHARLIE brought his record books in at supper, contemptuously tossing them on the table before Mark. He made it plain enough that his assistance was not available. After supper he disappeared.

Mark was glad for that. Idling over his pie, he covertly watched Nell and her mother bustle about the kitchen. That only verified his earlier realization. Following Nell's every move, he forgot the parties, the pretty girls, the friends back East. But she was already promised to Charlie.

Gathering up the records, Mark moved to his room. He lighted a lamp and began the tedious job. Nell kept crowding into his mind, disrupting him. He caught himself leaning back to daydream about her. Again and again he had to push himself back to his chore. But even with the interruptions, it didn't take too long.

He pushed up from his chair and stretched wearily. He needed some answers. Moving into the parlor, he caught the sound of voices from the porch. He crossed to the front door. Nell and Charlie sat in the two rawhide-bottom rockers. Mark pushed through the door.

Charlie swore. "Can't even court your girl without getting spied on."

"I wasn't spying," Mark said, crossing to the low railing to face them.

"I'll bet," Charlie growled. "What do you want, then?"

Mark shoved hands into his pockets and sat on the railing. "I want some information, but not from you. Nell," he said, before Charlie could protest, "what ratio does a cattleman figure his herd ought to multiply in a year?"

"I can tell you," Charlie said. "Why don't you ask me?"

Mark ignored him. "You've lived in cattle country long enough to know that, Nell. What's the usual ratio?"

"About one-to-four, I think," she said. "That's the way Dad always used to figure."

Charlie hunched forward. Even in the dark, with only the dim light from inside, Mark saw his antagonism. Charlie was daring Mark to make an open statement.

"Your tally books show about one-to-ten," Mark said. "Why?"

"Hard winters," Charlie said, too quickly. "Not enough fence. Hell, we've never had enough men on a roundup to do it right. The colonel wouldn't give me enough money to hire the hands."

"You've had two men here for all those three years. Can't the three of you handle five hundred head?"

"It's rough country," Charlie said lamely.

"I've seen rougher."

The foreman bristled. "What're you getting at?"

"And what about that inventory the colonel demanded?" Mark said. "In the latest one there's a wagon missing."

"We lost it."

Mark shrugged. "Down a gopher hole, I suppose. And Charlie, don't these mares ever raise families?"

"Are you trying to accuse Charlie of something?" Nell asked, sitting upright in her chair.

"If you have anything to say," Charlie grumbled, "come out and say it."

Mark hesitated, then said, "The least I can accuse Charlie of is incompetence."

"Watch it, sick boy," Charlie snapped.

"You watch it," Mark said heatedly. "I want some explanations. What's been going on around here?"

Charlie thrust up from his chair. "Why, you—"

"Charlie," Nell said, putting a hand on his arm. She stood, then, and faced Mark. "You've no call to talk like that. Charlie has done a good job here, considering that the owner was so far away and didn't care anyway."

"Then Charlie wouldn't mind taking a ride with me," Mark said. "Even with as many cattle as we've lost, we could surely find some sticking around the corners somewhere."

"I sure would mind," Charlie raged. "I've done my job the way I saw it. And if it doesn't suit you, then I'm quitting."

"You'll forfeit any pay due you," Mark reminded him.

Charlie cursed, and Nell stepped in front of him. She said, "Mark, that's no way to treat a man who's been as loyal as Charlie has. You owe him something."

"I don't figure that Teapot owes Charlie anything," Mark said. "Charlie quit; I didn't fire him."

Nell glanced back to the foreman, then said, "If you'd apologize, he might reconsider."

Smiling wryly, Mark shook his head and strode into the house. Even in his room he could still hear Charlie's muttering. For one brief moment Mark felt big and strong and triumphant.

But already the victory had turned sour. Mark had wanted to separate Nell from Charlie, and he had not succeeded. He had only succeeded in putting himself in an impossible

position. It went without saying that Charlie's men would leave when the ramrod did. That would leave a tenderfoot to run a spread that had been too much for three experienced hands. And it went without saying, too, that the colonel would accept no failure.

Mark had gained nothing. He had lost heavily. He had even lost his chance with Nell. His inferences, his questions, had forced her to take sides with Charlie. Mark had only driven her farther from him.

THE three men rode out early the next morning. Mark watched them from the front door. He almost called them back, but his pride prevented that. A wave of helplessness and aloneness swept him. Like a whipped dog, he shuffled to the kitchen.

Mrs. Rawlings bustled about the kitchen with forced cheeriness, but Nell reflected nothing of her mother's spirits. She refused to speak, even to meet Mark's gaze. And finally even Mrs. Rawlings lapsed into worried silence. Mark stuffed himself with pancakes, eggs, bacon and coffee.

Then, his belly full, he said, "I take it you're staying with me, Mrs. Rawlings."

"Oh, yes." She turned away from the stove, her round face bright from the heat. She took a heavy step toward the table, and a wide smile spread to her happy eyes. "Colonel Holdridge pays me well. I'll stay on as long as I'm wanted. Doesn't matter to me who's running the shebang."

"Good," Mark said, swiveling his glance to Nell. "You're still in the colonel's employ as a nurse. Are you staying?"

The hostility in her eyes killed any joy Mark might have found in her answer. She said, "I won't leave my mother."

Mark shoved up from the table, buckled on his gunbelt, and went out to the corral. Saddling the buckskin stallion, he tried to formulate a plan. But he could think of nothing but Nell. Her attitude told him plainly that he had eliminated himself as a suitor for her.

Then the sting of her rejection of him seared through to his vanity. Angrily he swung up into the saddle. The stallion carried him fast and far. Mark rode with his gaze fixed straight ahead, seeing nothing.

When the anger burned itself out, he hung limp in the saddle. Halting the stallion, he found himself in country he had never seen before. He vaguely remembered that his shadow had been ahead, swinging to the right. He must have ridden west. With the direction decided upon, he half fell from the saddle, and ground-tied the stallion. Then he crawled near a clump of pinon pine, collapsed, and slept.

He awoke refreshed but famished and cursed himself for coming away without food. But at least he had the strength to walk to the horse and climb aboard. Taking a bearing on the near-noon sun, he headed the stallion east.

But his wasted body lacked the reserve to carry him past a missed meal. Hunger became a gnawing, demanding thing within him. The meager bit of energy hoarded during the brief nap was soon spent.

Mark clung grimly to the saddle horn. He had to go on. If he didn't return to the house by sundown, Nell and her mother might be alarmed. But even if they did search for him, where would they look? And he knew beyond a doubt that he couldn't survive long without food and shelter.

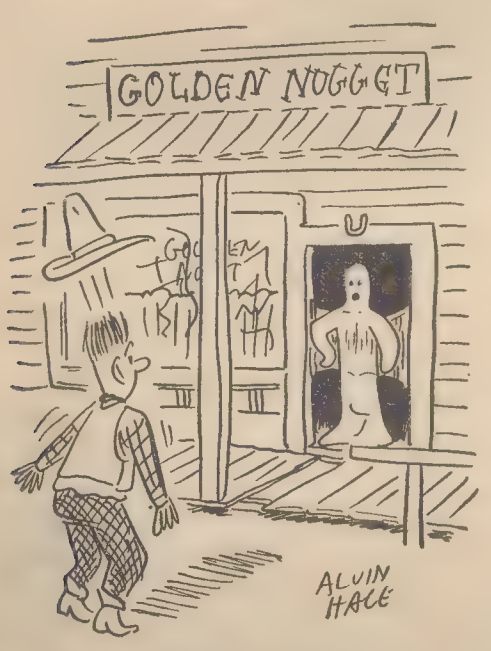
He swayed, caught himself. Dimly he realized that the buckskin was keeping on an eastward route. But the black veil of fatigue pressed tighter around Mark. The prairie ahead heaved and rolled like a great ocean. Then, as though caught in a giant tornado, the vast land began to turn, slowly at first, then faster and faster, until it became a hideous, swirling pool that sucked and pulled at him. He felt himself falling.

Later, when consciousness returned, Mark felt rested, and knew that he had slept. He thought of the horse, and came up with a start. Apparently the stallion had sensed the situation. He grazed nearby. Mark checked the sun. It rode low, toward the horizon.

Already time ran short. Mark pulled himself into the saddle, and the buckskin headed east. But this time Mark's strength fled faster. All too soon, giddiness left him light-headed. And too soon the prairie began to pitch and roll. The ridiculous thought occurred to Mark that if this continued he'd soon have his sea legs. Then, again, he fell.

This time, when he awoke, the western sky blazed with the sun's last effort to hold back the night. Sudden panic pushed Mark to his feet and into the saddle. If he fell and slept again, he would awake to darkness and diminished chances of survival. This time he had to stay in the saddle.

But the stallion moved on a treadmill. Seemingly hours passed, yet they made no progress, and still the sky burned red from the sun's passing. Mark slumped forward,



"What'd you expect in a ghost town—people?"

weakly clutching the horse's neck, the saddlehorn gouging his belly.

He stared blankly at the ground passing beneath him. Each pebble, each prickly pear that thrust through the endless buffalo grass seemed to shake his weakened body. He was startled when the stallion's hoofs fell sharply on rock.

The colonel, he remembered, had bought grassland. It was downright impudent for these rocks to be here. He'd put that fact in his first report. When he felt stronger, he'd ride back to this spot and order those rocks off Teapot land. The nerve of them.

The stallion kept on, and now Mark soared aloft like a great eagle, scanning the colonel's land. And what was that? It was hard to see now, with night rushing in from the east, but Mark made it out finally. It was bits of straw. He took a second look to make sure, and he chuckled to himself. Very clever of those rocks. They had disguised themselves as haystacks in order to remain on Teapot land. But they hadn't fooled Mark. No, sir. Even a rock had to get up early to put one over on old Mark.

Night clamped its black lid on the sky and tossed a chill breeze across the prairie. Fear brought Mark erect in the saddle. The wind howled in his ears, and all around him the great black ocean seethed and pounded. The deck beneath him tilted and pitched. Far out in the raging storm he spied the dancing, dipping lights of another ship. He wanted to shout, "Ship ahoy," but the words jammed in his throat. And suddenly he knew that the ships would crash. He wondered about the lifeboats. But it was too late. Already he felt his own ship sinking.

HE CAME awake slowly, not certain whether he was sinking with a ship, soaring like an eagle, or riding a buckskin stallion. He ached in every bone, yet felt comfortable and rested. At length he recognized the ceiling of his room, and knew he was in bed. He stretched luxuriously.

"Feeling better?"

He swiveled his head, saw Nell sitting beside his bed, and propped himself on one elbow. "Better than what?" he asked.

"Better than when you fell off your horse out past the corral."

"Lots better."

She smiled wearily, relief shining in her hollow eyes. "You gave us quite a scare," she said, "and if you ever pull a fool trick like that again, we're going to tie you in bed."

Mark lay back against the pillow, trying to sort out what had happened, trying to separate reality from hallucination. "The buckskin brought me all the way home?"

"Until you fell off."

Mark grinned, discarding the rolling sea

and the ship and the soaring eagle. "Is there a rocky patch around here?"

"Yes," Nell said, "just beyond the rise west of the house. There's a hollow that's all rock. It sits right on the Teapot boundary. It must reach a quarter of a mile on either side."

"Maybe that's it."

"Maybe that's what?"

Mark took a moment to get his thinking straight. The thought had just leaped into his mind and he hadn't had time to examine it. He said, "If somebody's been stealing our stock, maybe that's where they're taking 'em off Teapot land. That's about the only place they couldn't be tracked."

Nell smiled, then grinned widely. The chuckle that began deep in her throat came out a giggle. Mirth crashed past the barrier of her weary control, and she laughed like a drunken cowboy. Mark watched, not certain whether to laugh with her or to be offended. He knew that, at her stage of fatigue, anything could touch off hysteria. So he waited.

Finally the fit of laughter had passed and Nell sat limp in her chair, gasping for breath. "I'm sorry," she said. "But it was so funny. What you said, I mean."

"What's so funny about stolen cattle?" he asked, irritated.

"It's just the idea." She took a deep breath and dabbed at her eyes. "Why, that hollow's less than half a mile from the house. When the wind's down you can hear people talking over there." She paused, stifling a giggle. "I was picturing a gang of rustlers whispering to the cows as they tip-toed over the rocks."

The giggle burst out of her in a high squeak. She darted up from her chair and ran from the room. The door banged behind her. The force of her laughter shook the whole house.

"Damn it," Mark yelled to anybody within earshot, "I'm hungry."

Mrs. Rawlings and Nell fed him. They fed him much and often. Nell accused him of stuffing the mattress with what he couldn't eat. Mrs. Rawlings wondered if he had a pet bear under the bed. But Mark ate it all and howled for more. In two days he was pacing the parlor.

The third day he slipped from the house and saddled the buckskin. Mounting, he wheeled toward the gate. Nell stood there, hands on hips. She wore a man's pants and shirt—both too big for her—and boots that fit.

"I didn't tell you that you were in shape to ride," she said.

He grinned. "I didn't ask you."

She ignored his statement and moved to her black mare. "Well, if you're going, I'm going along."

"I didn't ask you," he repeated.

"I don't want your horse coming in alone again," she said, facing him. "So you'd better ask me."

Mark guided his horse over to her and slid from the saddle. Suddenly serious, he said, "There's only one thing I want to ask you."

"What's that?" She gauged his sober gaze, and her eyes narrowed wonderingly.

"Are you in love with Charlie Blake?" Mark asked bluntly. Surprise widened her eyes, but before he could read the bare truth there, resentment veiled her emotions. For a moment she regarded him coldly. Then she turned to her horse.

"That's none of your business," she said.

They mounted in silence and rode out of the corral. Mark closed the gate. Moving out slowly, they were rounding the tool shed when a shout hailed them. Mark turned, to see Charlie Blake loping his gelding up the drive.

"Where d'you think you're going?" Charlie demanded, reining up beside Mark.

Mark eyed the big puncher for a moment. He said, "You don't work here any more, Charlie. Nothing about this ranch is any of your business."

"Nell is," Charlie said. He nudged his mount nearer Mark's. "If you're taking a shine to her, forget it. She isn't riding with you now or any time."

"I guess that's for her to decide," Mark said.

Charlie tensed, half rising in his stirrups. "I said she isn't. If that doesn't convince you, I'll fix you so you can't ride with anybody."

Before Mark could move, Charlie leaped from his horse. His huge arms closed around Mark, dragging him to the ground. Mark lit on his back. The wind rasped out of him. Gulping in huge breaths, he saw Charlie scramble to his feet. The puncher reached,

grabbed a handful of Mark's shirt, and hauled him to his feet. A fist arced, smashed at Mark's face. He felt his knees buckle, felt other blows punishing him.

AGAIN he awoke in his own bed. But this time stabbing, fiery pain snapped him from unconsciousness. Nell bent over him, holding something cool and moist to his jaw. She smiled warmly at him, and he saw new light in her eyes. It wasn't a sparkle, exactly, but more like a glow of a newly kindled fire.

Abruptly she was gone. And then she was back, carrying a tray loaded with steaming dishes. She propped him up and helped him feed himself. He wondered if ever a woman had been so kind, so compassionate.

He ate heartily, and felt a blissful drowsiness stealing through him. Nell removed the pillows from behind him and tucked the covers carefully around his bruised body. For just a moment she gazed down at him.

"You asked me a question about Charlie Blake," she said. "The answer is no. Not now, not ever."

Mark was smiling when he went to sleep.

He awoke aching but refreshed, hungry but comfortable. Dressing, he hurried to the kitchen. He found breakfast ready, and learned that he had been unconscious or asleep most of twenty-four hours. He found Nell dressed to ride again. Both horses were saddled. His gunbelt was looped over his saddlehorn. He noticed the sheathed rifle on her saddle.

They rode quickly over the rise. Clattering onto the rocks of the hollow, they reined up. Mark made a quick inspection from a point a hundred feet from the fence. He rode to the boundary line. Dismounting, he tested one fence post, then another. He got down on hands and knees to inspect the rocks.

"What is it?" Nell asked, swinging down beside him.

Mark stood, smiling. "If you were at the house and heard a wagon moving on these rocks, would you think anything about it?"

"No." She wrinkled her pug nose in puzzlement.

"Did you see the dribbles of straw starting out there?" he asked, pointing back along the rocks. When she nodded, he said, "I'm guessing the marks on that rock were made by the iron tire of something like a hay wagon. And at least two fence posts have been taken out and put back. No wires were cut. They just laid the fence down and the cattle walked over it."

"They?"

"Who owns the land across the fence?"

Slow revelation replaced the puzzlement in Nell's face. She said, "Charlie rented it with an option to buy." She paused, looking about her. "But how could anybody steal without our knowing it?"

"Easy," Mark said. "Charlie moved a load of hay down here. When a few cows had found it, he just took the fence down and moved the wagon a little farther onto his land each day. No noise, no men conspicuously absent. Just some missing stock, horses too—and a wagon that he forgot all about."

"Can you prove it? He probably took unbranded stock."

Mark moved along the fence, loosening posts. Mounting, he said, "I'm hoping Charlie was too greedy to wait. If he was, we won't have any trouble proving that he used a running iron."

Mark guided his horse across the fence he had taken down, and waited for Nell. Together they followed the bits of straw toward a thick stand of timber. The movement and the excitement began to tell on Mark. He slumped in his saddle, resting. Halfway between fence and timber, Nell sucked in a quick breath. Mark snapped alert. Charlie Blake and his two men rode toward them from the timber. Nell fumbled for her rifle.

"Leave it alone," Charlie yelled. He reined up near them and said, "You don't have to put on a show for anybody, Nell."

A quick, cold fear knotted around Mark's stomach. Had he let himself be led into a trap?"

"That was no show," Nell said icily. "I'd've killed you if I'd gotten that rifle out."

"Hey," Charlie said, "what's the matter with you?"

"The matter is with you, Charlie Blake," Nell said. "You're a thief and a liar and a bully."

"Shut up!" he roared. "You'll talk different before we're through with you."

Behind Charlie, one of his men said, "We aren't laying a hand on a woman."

"I know we aren't." Charlie leveled a scornful gaze on Mark and said, "You've seen too much, sick boy. Only I'm not dumb enough to plug you and get my neck stretched. You're gonna turn around and ride to the house. You're gonna pack up and catch the next train going East. And if you don't want anything to happen to Nell, you aren't gonna say anything to anybody. If nobody blabbers, we have it set up good here.

"It won't work," Mark said quietly.

"Like hell it won't." Charlie leaped to the grounds. "You want another beating? Get down. You get down too, Nell. And stand clear of that rifle."

MARK saw Nell slide from her saddle. Then he dismounted. He made no effort to close with Charlie. He said, "If you think I'd ride away and leave Nell with a skunk like you, you're loco. Besides, I've got a job to do here." He paused significantly. "I guess I'd rather die than face the colonel."

Charlie's face brightened. "Well, now, I reckon I can fix that. You're wearing a gun, sick boy. Try to use it on me."

"Mark, no!" Nell cried.

"Or maybe," Charlie prodded, "you were talking to hear your head rattle."

Mark watched the puncher coolly. Oddly, he felt no fear. He had practiced enough to know his own capabilities. Now he only hoped that Charlie wasn't better.

"Maybe," he said. "And maybe you're too yellow to find out."

Derision creased Charlie's face. He opened his mouth as if to speak, then grabbed for his gun. But the feint didn't fool Mark. With the first twitch of Charlie's right arm, his own hand flashed down. Clearing leather, the gun roared once. Charlie's gun bucked, spurting dirt at Mark's feet, then spun out of his hand. The puncher sprawled back, clutching at his shoulder.

"Pick him up," Mark commanded, covering the other two.

They slid to the ground and heaved Charlie across his saddle. They mounted again, showing no fight.

"The word'll spread fast," Mark said. "Get Charlie patched up and clear out. Show up in his country again and you'll be strung up for rustling. Now move."

The three horses turned and moved away. Watching them, Mark holstered his gun. Nell eased into the crook of his arm.

"I'm proud of you," she said, brushing her lips across his cheek. "There's more man here than I thought."

Fatigue rushed upon Mark, washing starch from every bone in his body. "Oh, I'm pretty tough," he said. "Now will you help me get on my horse?"

KNOW YOUR WEST

(Answers to the questions on page 89)

1. Swaddies.
2. It took more expert skill to handle the oxen.
3. True.
4. Utah, Arizona and New Mexico.
5. Photographer, many of whose fine pictures of frontier life in Montana and Wyoming have recently been reproduced in a book, "The Frontier Years," by Col. Mark H. Brown and W. R. Felton.
6. (2) A spur whose shank is shaped like a girl's leg below the knee.
7. John Prescott, Wayne D. Overholser, Bennett Foster, Walt Coburn, Luke Short, Frank Bonham, Will Cook, Norman A. Fox, Thomas Thompson, Bill Gulick, Charles N. Heckelmann, Harry Sinclair Drago, Steve Frazee, Nelson Nye, Noel M. Loomis, Gene Markey and S. Omar Barker.
8. (2) Any type of oiled or medicated "rubbing station" on which cattle may rub is called a cattle oiler. It helps keep off ticks, bugs and flies.
9. He got thrown.
10. Wax candle shavings spread on a floor helped make it smooth for dancing.

OUT OF THE CHUTES

IT'S NOT official yet, but it's pretty certain that Casey Tibbs has won the All-Around Cowboy Championship for 1955. With results in from all the rodeos except about twenty minor ones, Casey had almost 41,000 points and his nearest competitor, Jim Shoulders, something over 36,000.

But we've got a couple of other cowboys on our minds right now, who have never been listed in the RCA standings. Recently we told you about an Israeli cowboy. Now we can go ourselves one better with news of an Iranian, Fereydoun, the son of Iran's top man, Premier Hussein Ala.

The other cowboy is an American friend of Fereydoun's, a recent Harvard graduate who likes to travel. The two of them were scouting around the southern plains of Iran, which is wild and woolly country without a hotdog stand or a gas station in it.

They were traveling around in a jeep seeing the sights and looking for adventure, when some natives told them that there was a herd of about thirty onagers in the area.

The onager is a forerunner of the donkey, looking a lot like the donkey except for slightly smaller ears and a bright red coat. This ancient breed has survived since pre-historic times but, since the 1930's, when automobiles began to be used in Iran, onagers are becoming scarce. Commercial hunters have been chasing them down and killing them.

Anyway, Fereydoun and Bronson went looking for the herd and finally found it, and then decided to try to capture a few, mostly to get a good look at them. To do that the two young men put on practically a full-scale rodeo.

The technique was to use the jeep, first as a cutting horse, second as a dogging horse. Bronson reported later that horses would have been much better, especially for the cutting operation, because the jeep made too much noise and "just hasn't got any brains."

Anyway, they gave chase in the jeep, separating the colts from the herd one at a time, and then taking off after the loose onager. At this point the bulldogging—or onager-dogging—comes in.

"You get alongside," explained Bronson, "lean out of the jeep, hug the colt around the neck, and let him pull you out. He soon tires, and then you throw him to the ground."

From that point it looked like the finish of a calf-roping event, as the onager was roped and tied. And when one was secured, the cowboys on jeep-back took off after another.

After three hours of this, five onagers had been captured. It was violent exercise, needless to say, so Fereydoun and Bronson decided that five were enough.

They didn't get very far with the five. A few natives who had been watching this performance seemed to think it was all for their benefit. They wanted all five to tame and use for beasts of burden; but finally the captors persuaded them to be satisfied with two. Another of the animals is now in the zoo in Rome.

The fourth recently arrived in New York and has found a home at the Bronx Zoo. Shipping the little fellow halfway around the world, first by truck and then by plane, was almost as difficult as catching him. He kicked apart two packing cases before he was quieted with a blindfold. The name onager, by the way, comes from an old word meaning a stonethrowing catapult. Catapult is a good name for this one, and the people who were trying to ship him were sure he'd throw stones if he could.

Oh, yes, that fifth onager. He's still in captivity, and he's up for adoption. If any rodeo producers are interested in seeing if he's another Midnight, the address is Shiraz, Iran.

Adios,
THE EDITORS

The Drifters

By Allan R. Bosworth

Pablo gently pulled the unconscious herder from the burning wagon

THE STORY SO FAR: To get revenge on cattle baron JIM HARNEY, ex-cattleman STEVE MURDOCK goes into partnership with CARLA VON WETTNER to drive sheep to land leased from KYLE FRASER. Carla accompanies Steve on the drive, and falls in love with him. The sheep are moving on land owned by the government but used by the cattlemen, making the drive legal but unpopular. Harney and another big rancher, MASE SMITH, try to stop the drive, but fail. Land owned by the other big ranchers, ED VALENTINE and BILL CRENSHAW, is still to be passed. Steve gets support from sheep-hating SHERIFF ARCH KENNEDY, who admits the legality of the drive; and from an old friend, KATIE, now married to Harney's foreman, BIG LEWIS. On Steve's side, too, are ACE BABB and other small ranchers, who have been oppressed by Harney and are organizing to fight him. Harney, who meanwhile is building up his empire by buying stolen cattle through MARLIN DUBOSE, sees his power beginning to crack.

PART THREE

ED VALENTINE pulled himself to the rimrock and sat there, blowing hard while he took a pair of field glasses out of their case. This was the highest point on the whole northern half of the hundred sections he grazed. Low, rocky hills tumbled away to the north, with gray and dun stretches in between to mark the mesquite flats and chaparral, and no greenness anywhere to relieve the monotony.

A man didn't have to go down there in the flats to see how sparse the feed was; he didn't have to squat on the sun-baked alkali and feel the brittleness of the grass between his fingers. He could see it all from here; he could look at a cow a mile away and tell by the way she moved that she was half-starved. There wasn't enough grass for the six thousand head of cattle wearing the Flying V iron, let alone enough to share with a flock of close-cropping woollies. Not enough water, either.

Even before he lifted the glasses to his eyes, he saw the dust cloud hanging over a draw that ran north of his boundary fence. The sheep were about three miles away, still on Diamond Dot, and out of sight in the draw brush. Then he saw the chuck wagon roll up out of the draw, a Mexican driving it. Over on the left, toward the Two Sevens fence, was a slight figure on a dun horse. It looked, Valentine thought, like the Von Wettner girl.

He raised the glasses again, and saw the sheep spill over the nearer draw bank like a slow, nightmarish crest of dirty gray flood water. It was almost sundown now. Purple shadows flowed like rising tides into the canyons and coolness came on the wind. Some of the tightness went out of Valentine's overwrought nerves. The sheep wouldn't reach the fence before dark; the showdown wouldn't be until tomorrow. There was time to send for part of the crew that was out branding Flying V calves. By morning Valentine would have six men at the gate to meet the threat of invasion.

THE freight outfit Dubose had been waiting for pulled in at Jake Evans's camp on the San Juan that same evening. Jake had found two polecats in his traps that morning, and had buried them all day so the clean earth would absorb most of the smell. Now he had dug them up, and was busy casing the hides on willow fork frames, when he heard the trace chains jingling and looked up in surprise. The Tate boys, Alvin and Howie, were driving the six-horse team, but they had a mounted escort—Ace Babb, Joe Collins, and Walter Sims.

"Howdy!" Jake called. "What is this, a San Juan reunion and camp meeting?"

"Fishing trip," Ace said. He looked Jake in the eye with an innocent grin. "Hear the catfish are biting good in the Rio Grande."

"That's none of my business," Jake said. "Glad to see you out of the pokey. Have you boys had supper?"

"We haven't time to eat, Jake," said Ace. He swung down and looked at his cinch strap, and pulled a bottle of whisky out of his saddlebag. "We brought our bait. Here—fire a shot for liberty!"

"Don't mind if I do," Jake said.

The bottle went around. Howie Tate said, "Jake, Alvin and I would like to take these lead horses out of harness and put our saddles on 'em. Leave the other four here tonight, and if you happened to be going to Dubose's any time in the next few days, we thought you could team up your horses with 'em and deliver this load of freight. It's nothing that'll spoil. We'll pay you for it, of course."

"Don't want any pay," Jake said. He picked up a cedar stick and whittled on it with his skinning blade. Something was up, and he halfway suspected what it was. All these men had it in for Jim Harney. "I have to go to Candelilla for some grub, anyhow. Is that bottle working, Ace?"

"It is now," Ace said.

The Tate boys unhitched and saddled. The bottle was emptied, and Jake Evans carefully retrieved it as a future container for wolf bait which, according to his own recipe, had to be buried in a tightly corked bottle for weeks.

"Hope you trap that white polecat, Jake," Ace called back as the group rode out into the gathering darkness. He chuckled, and added softly, "Jake reminds me of Juan Flores, Don Miguel's *segundo*. One of 'em is hepped on getting himself a white polecat hide, and the other is plumb loco about digging up buried treasure. Wonder who'll get rich first?"

Nobody answered that, and they came out of the hackberry motte riding stirrup close, and saw the first stars overhead. The whisky burned under their belts, firing the flames of recklessness and resentment; and if there had not been enough liquor to do it yet, Joe Collins had another bottle in his saddlebags.

"Which way, Ace?" asked Walter Sims.

"I figure east till we come to Harney's fence. If we ride up it we're bound to find Steve's camp."

They stopped twice to let the horses blow, and pass the bottle around, and what had started out to be an expedition simply to reinforce Steve Murdock's crew got slightly off the track. When they reached the fence line, Ace Babb reined his horse and turned to the others.

"How many miles of wire did Harney string to block off the San Juan waterhole?" he asked thickly.

"Six, maybe eight," Collins guessed.

Ace pulled a pair of wire cutters from his saddlebag. "He owes us some, then. We'll give Big Lewis some sure-enough fence-riding to do!"

He leaned from his saddle. The cutters made a snicking noise, and the first wire parted with a singing sound, like a broken banjo string.

ED VALENTINE hadn't slept much. He rode up from the south when the dawn light was soft on the hills, with four men behind him. That cold, sweating worry was deep in the back of his mind, and his breakfast coffee churned uneasily in the pit of his stomach.

He wasn't afraid of any man, he told himself. What bothered him was nerves and his over-active imagination. He thought of the sheep crossing Flying V range, and in his mind's eye they were like a plague of locusts, devouring everything in their path; and if they scattered, as they had done on Diamond Dot, he would be bankrupt. He remembered Marlin Dubose saying slyly, "I'd hate to have Harney mad at *me!*" and then he thought of the ten thousand dollars he had borrowed from Harney's bank last fall on a six month's note. So he had to stop the sheep.

He looked back at the other riders. Three of them were thirty-dollar-a-month cowboys, young and tough and not giving a damn. Pay them their wages, and you owned their guns. The fourth was Henry Cass, his foreman. Cass was Valentine's own age, around forty, heavy and slow-moving, a family man who didn't stampede easily, a level-headed man good to have along in a tight.

They topped a rocky rise just as the light came full over the gray-green brush. The boundary fence was a half mile ahead; the gate was there in the chaparral, and the fence ran on westward to join Harney's wire at right angles, about a mile away. Valentine drew rein and looked, and saw nothing. Seeing nothing was bad for his ragged nerves.

They rode up to the pasture gate, and waited there, Winchester across their saddlehorns. Ed Valentine got down and fooled with his cinch strap, and found the palms of his hands sweating. The three younger men watched the wagon road and talked and laughed a little too loudly. Henry Cass was watching Valentine more than he watched the Diamond Dot brush.

Then they heard the sheep. The sound was faint at first, a confused, distant murmuring; but it swelled in volume, and individual bleats made themselves heard. Valentine's stomach tied itself in knots. His wife, Bessie, had followed him all the way to the corrals, begging him to be careful. This was a hell of a time to have trouble, with her expecting a baby. He got back in his saddle, remembering that there were only three men to face, two of them Mexicans who probably didn't pack guns. A drop of sweat crawled down the back of his neck. What in hell was keeping Murdock?

"Here he comes," Cass said under his breath.

Valentine's jangled nerves jumped. He had forgotten that Steve had been walking the day before; he had expected to see a tall man on horseback coming around the turn in the rutted, weed-grown road. Instead, here was Murdock the flockmaster, walking.

Valentine said, "This is as far as you go, Murdock! You can't buffalo me with that heifer-dust about State land. Sure, right here it's State land. But down yonder a few miles, I owe it, Murdock. And you aren't going to cross an inch of it!"

"That's mighty neighborly of you, Ed," Steve said sarcastically.

He turned his back and watched thoughtfully as the vanguard of the flock came into view. Somehow Valentine had a vague feeling that Murdock was stalling for time. The sheep began to bunch near the wire, stirring dust that blew into Valentine's face. He waved his arm angrily and shouted again.

Steve Murdock looked at him and shook his head. He addressed Cass. "Henry, you'd bet-

ter do something before Ed bites himself! Look behind you, there!"

He pointed, grinning. Henry Cass turned slowly, then stiffened in his saddle. Ace Babb and the other San Juan riders were sitting their horses a few paces back of the Flying V crew. Every man held a pistol or a saddle gun, and one glance at their faces told Cass they would sooner shoot than shave.

Valentine turned, too. He ripped out an oath and the Winchester jerked up toward his shoulder, but Cass crowded his horse close and grabbed the gun. "Don't be a damned fool!" he told Valentine, and then looked reproachfully at Joe Collins. "I never thought I'd live to see *you* repping for a sheep outfit, Joe!"

"Neither did I," Collins responded cheerfully. "Just shows you what a man will do if you crowd him too far. I'll take the guns, boys. Unbuckle your cartridge belts and let 'em slide."

Ace Babb, grinning hugely, rode forward and opened the gate. With mock ceremony that made Valentine grind his teeth in frustrated rage, he doffed his battered Stetson, bowed to Steve, and waved the sheep into Flying V as elaborately as he would have ushered a duchess into the ballroom.

Watching from the rim of the noisy flock, Carla drew her first easy breath. She had been asleep in her tent when the San Juan riders found the camp just before dawn; she had not heard Steve outline the maneuver that sent them back through Two Sevens pasture to ride up, unheard, behind the Flying V crew. And neither she nor Steve knew anything yet about the fence-cutting of Ace Babb and his men.

Steve put Carla back on the wagon with Pablo and took to the saddle again. The sheep trailed six miles into Flying V that day, with their armed guard. The crisis was yet to come. Valentine and his men had ridden away with surly threats after their guns and cartridge belts had been thrown into the wagon.

Steve and Carla studied the map that night. The flock was full stomached and content, and three armed outriders guarded it against attempts at reprisal. And there was another satisfaction. The unity of purpose, the solidity of organization that had begun when Steve returned to the shearing camp, had spread to include the San Juan ranchers. A few more supporters, he told himself, and they would be able to fight Jim Harney himself—anywhere and any time.

He drew a ragged pencil line down the map, angling from east to west and roughly following the boundary of a plat. "Salado Draw," he told Carla. "It comes in about here, maybe four miles from the Flying V ranchhouse, and runs all the way to the San Juan. This is where Valentine will draw the deadline."

She shook her head. "Steve, that man frightens me—not because he's strong, but because he's weak. He has no control."

Steve said, "He's a strange one, all right. With him, you'd never know whether he was going to pull his gun, or bust out crying. But we handled him today. And look at the map. We're getting to the home stretch!"

Ace Babb grinned at them across the campfire. "Maybe forty-five miles to Rafter F fence," he drawled. "How many days?"

"Maybe seven," Steve said.

Pablo Ordonez shook his grizzled head. "No, Estevan. Not this time. Because in two or three more days, the little ones come. The lambs."

Steve had almost forgotten. He groaned. "If it's not one thing in this business, it's forty others! Well, we can lamb on the move, can't we?"

"It is more better to stop. Sometimes the ewes do not know their lambs. They will not let them suck. They leave them. There would be mothers without lambs in the flock, and lambs without mothers in the chaparral. We would loose many little ones."

It was another way of reminding them of the stupidity of sheep, of their utter dependence on man. It was another problem to be slept on, to be met when it came. There might be others more immediate.

FROM Mase Smith's corner post, the Two Sevens fence line changed direction slightly and angled away toward the southwest. A day's drive had put the flock several miles away from Harney's territory, and Steve could only guess at what deviltry was planned over there; he had not seen Big

Lewis and his fence riders for a couple of days. During the following morning, while the flock moved slowly south, he sent Joe Collins to reconnoiter.

Joe knew all the Two Sevens hands, and could pass himself off as still working for Crenshaw's Bar L, out looking for strays. He returned to the chuck wagon while the sheep were halted for nooning. He unsaddled and put a stake rope on his horse, then strode into camp and filled a tin plate with beans.

"Somebody cut the Two Sevens fence," Joe said. "Six miles of it, they told me."

Steve looked up suspiciously. "When did this happen?"

"They figured night before last, from the tracks. And you haven't heard the half of it. Seems like Harney got back yesterday. He went screaming for Arch Kennedy, blaming the sheep outfit, of course. About the same time, Ed Valentine sent Henry Cass for the sheriff, too."

"That's interesting," Steve said. "Then what?"

Collins grinned happily. "Arch wouldn't come. He said there had been a raid on the Bar L that same night, and rustlers drove off about a hundred head of cows. Said it was more important for him to go after rustled stock than to get mixed up in this sheep foolishness again."

Steve grunted. This meant that Arch Kennedy had really thrown political discretion to the winds; it was an open break with Harney. The cattlemen's concrete action in appealing to the law for assistance against the sheep outfit was pleasing—and disturbing, too. Now that the law had refused to become involved, what would happen?

"Sure you boys don't know anything about the wire cutting?" he fired at Ace Babb.

"Who, us?" Ace said, wide-eyed. "If you ask me, it was the rustlers. You ask me something else, and I'll tell you I figure Jim Harney just might have tripped himself on his own rope, this time?"

"How do you mean?"

"Well, Mitch Turner and the Ketchum boys and all the others have been mighty busy the last few months. But I haven't heard anything about stock being rustled from the Two Sevens. It's always Crenshaw, or Mase Smith, or Valentine, or Don Miguel who comes up short. And Kyle Fraser; he hardly has anything left. Harney wants the whole Bend. He'd like to see everybody busted out but himself. Don't tell me there isn't a tie-in!"

Steve drank his coffee thoughtfully. Interesting again. He found it hard to believe that Jim Harney would take such a chance. But more than one Texas range empire had gotten its start with rustled cattle, and Harney owned a new ranch south of the Rio Grande.

Deadline was the next day at noon, at Salado Draw, a wide, brushy valley where the brown, drought-burned grass and weeds grew high. It was ten men on horseback, ranged in a long line above the farther cutbank, watching grimly over their ready guns, led by an emotionally unstable man who did not trust himself to speak. It was as far as the sheep could go without slaughter.

The sheep came up behind Steve, filling the bright day with their senseless blatting, spreading out along the draw rim. They would not take the cutbank unless forced, unless the bellwethers showed them the way. The chuck wagon creaked to a stop in the edge of the mesquites, and Steve saw Carla's hand flutter nervously to her mouth. The mules stood switching flies. The outriders came in.

The whole outfit, the machinery of the entire movement, ground to a halt, awaiting orders. Ace Babb and Joe Collins came up to the man on the coyote dun. They rode like cowboys going to a dance, and the devil was in their eyes.

Collins shifted his weight in the stirrups, making his saddle creak. He said, "There are six of us. That's enough. Say the word and I'll knock Valentine off that horse with my first shot."

"No, it's not that much your fight, Joe. Nobody's going to get shot if I can help it."

"But he can't hold up the whole drive just because he owns the next two sections!" Ace protested. "If you figure it that way, we could be here till hell freezes over!"

Steve smiled grimly. "The feed's good. There ought to be water down the draw a little way. Shuck off your saddles, boys, and let's make camp!"

Nobody moved on the far side of the dead-

line. The sheep nooned, filling themselves on Flying V grass. Steve and the San Juan riders squatted in the scanty shade of the mesquites and ate dinner. At one o'clock Valentine's men were still there, half concealed by the brush. Steve heard Valentine yelling to somebody to cut out his smoking before he set the grass afire. He grinned and rolled a cigarette.

Two o'clock. If the sheep drive was at a standstill, so was the spring roundup on the Flying V. At the moment the only man south of the Salado who appeared to be productively employed was the rider who went loping off to the windmill for a canteen of water. The lunchless cowboys tightened their belts, and Steve saw two or three of them conferring with Cass and Valentine, making angry, impatient gestures. He knew the breed. They wanted to ride across the draw and stampede the sheep, and get it over with. But Ed Valentine, despite all his nervous indecision, was sure of one thing. He did not want the sheep scattered all over his pasture, the way they had been on the Diamond Dot.

Three o'clock. Steve had Carla's sleeping tent pitched well back from the draw bank, but still in plain sight. It gave the camp an air of permanency.

Toward sundown, Henry Cass rode over. He said, "You've got till morning—maybe! I'll tell you something you don't know. Jim Harney sent word that if there weren't enough men here to stop you, he could bring some more. He's on his way by now."

"Let him come," Steve said, and turned away.

Henry Cass rode back across the draw with nothing definite to report. Darkness fell. Pablo cooked supper. Steve got out the map and called a council of war.

TWO o'clock in the morning found a thin moon riding behind a high-flying scud of clouds, and the wind brisk out of the southwest. Pablo struck Carla's tent and hitched the mules. Manuel came to the wagon where Steve and the San Juan men were saddling up.

"I have done as you told me, senor. I have stuffed grass in the bells of all the bell-wethers. They will make no noise."

"Good, Manuel. And remember, the dogs must not bark. How will you stop them from barking?"

The Mexican grinned. "I will es-speak to the dogs, senor. They will say nothing."

"Ready, Ace?" Steve asked. He stepped behind the wagon to strike a match and look at his watch. "Two-thirty. Give us half an hour, then let her rip! And Pablo—"

"I am ready, Estevan."

"Then go ahead, softly. Take care of the senorita and Diego. You know where to cross the draw—just this side of Harney's fence. When you get on the other side, whip up the mules. We will find you at daylight."

Ace Babb said, "Here we go, boys," and swung into his saddle.

Joe Collins and the Tate brothers followed, vanishing into the brush and heading northwest. Walter Sims had volunteered to help drive the sheep, figuring, he said dolefully, that sheep had come to the Bend to stay, and a man might as well learn how to herd them.

"All right, boys," Steve said then. "Easy does it!"

He led Castizo. Manuel, who had a way with sheep, got the bell wethers up and pointed in the same direction the wagon had gone. The grass-muffled bells gave out no sound; there were only a few bleats and grunts from the close-packed ewes. They moved slowly for a quarter mile, then a little faster around a bend in the draw. After that it was safe to take them down the cutbank, and use the dry creek bed for a stock trail.

Steve couldn't see his watch. It was about time, now, and walking over the draw rocks was difficult. He climbed into the saddle. They moved another quarter mile, the banks walling them in, shutting out sight and sound. He had begun to wonder, to worry a little, when the sudden staccato of gunfire rolled down the Salado.

Steve drew rein and listened for a moment, holding his breath. Ace and the other three were doing a good job of making it sound like gunfight at the upper end of the wide valley. If he knew Ed Valentine, that trigger-jumpy ranchman would be in the saddle by now, thinking that the reinforcements from Two Sevens had run headlong into trouble. If the diversionary action had succeeded at all,

it was now safe to drive the flock as fast as it could be driven, down the draw bed and under Jim Harney's fence.

Carla almost dozed on the wagon seat, but the route Pablo drove was rough. He had turned southward near the Two Sevens fence, crossed the draw, then put the mules into a trot for the next three miles. By the map Estevan had showed him, he was now across the strip of land Senor Valentine actually owned, and except for faint wheel tracks left behind, nobody would be the wiser. This was State land again, and Pablo believed, along with Estevan, that he had as much right on it as any man.

So he let the team slow to a walk. He did not want to be too far ahead. It was getting light in the east, and Estevan and Manuel and the Senor Sims would be hurrying the sheep along in the Two Sevens pasture—where somebody had very thoughtfully cut the wire—until they had passed Senor Valentine's land. Then they would come back through the fence.

Then the trouble happened.

It came out of the mesquites, out of the before-dawn darkness; it came so swiftly that Pablo had no time to reach behind the wagon seat, where Diego lay on his bedding roll, and get the Winchester that was there. There were four riders, maybe five. He could not see their faces; he only knew that they were *vaqueros,* and drunk with liquor or excitement and hate.

He heard the senorita scream, and he tried to manage the team and reach again for the gun, but then two of the men roped the standards on one side of the wagon, dallied the ropes around their saddle horns, and spurred their horses. The wagon tipped on two wheels and fell crashing on its side.

Pablo clutched at the side of the wagon seat; he tried desperately to cushion the shock of the fall for Carla, but the seat tore loose at the upper end and both of them were thrown violently clear of the wreck. He remembered hearing the splintering sound of the wagon bows breaking and the tip of canvas as the broken ends stabbed through the tarp; he heard the water keg and the gallon can of kerosene for the lantern spilling their contents over the upper side of the wagon. Then his head struck a rock, and there were fireworks in his skull.

The senorita was shaking him. "Pablo! Pablo! Diego is in the wagon! Pablo, please! I can't get him out! Help me!"

He was on his feet before he knew it. The fire was in the wagon tarp. It was running down the canvas where the spilled kerosene had soaked; it licked hungrily at the painted woodwork. And Diego must have struck his head when the wagon turned over.

Pablo whipped out his knife and slashed at the tarpaulin, cutting the drawstring at the front pucker, jerking it back from the broken bows. He thrust his hands through the flame to rip the tarpaulin clear, to peel it back toward the chuck-box at the endgate. He snatched up a slicker and beat the fire with it until he could see Diego lying sprawled with his head against the sideboards.

"He is all right, senorita!" Pablo said.

Together they jerked the wagon sheet clear and flung it behind them. The mules were standing patiently in their tangle of harness and twisted trace chains; horses, Pablo knew, would have been trying to drag the wreck all over the pasture.

He got his burned hands under Diego's armpits and gently pulled the unconscious herder out of the wagon. "He is all right," he repeated. "See if there is enough water left in the keg to throw into his face. How did this happen? Where are the *vaqueros?*"

"They rode away laughing," Carla said bitterly. "They smelled the kerosene spilling from the can, and one of them struck a match and threw it on the tarp. Then they rode away laughing!"

There was sudden brightness on the wagon train. Pablo whirled and cried out. Flying V grass was on fire. It had caught from the smouldering tarp, and now the wind was feeding the flames, spreading them, sending them racing up the wide valley of the Salado. The fire was already far beyond the control of two people, or six. There was nothing Pablo and Carla could do.

ED VALENTINE, waiting indecively on the south bank of the Salado, finally slept, and waked half-dazed when the gunfire made its thunder at the eastern rim-

rocks. He sprang up to throw his saddle on his horse, and saw that there was no campfire across the draw. Henry Cass had already sent one of the hands to reconnoiter the sheep camp, and this man came back with word that Murdock had pulled out.

The guns hammered again, farther south, toward Flying V headquarters, as if in a running fight. Now was no time to argue. Valentine hit spurs to his horse, and the others crashed after him through the chaparral. They rode a mile southeastward, then stopped to listen. Everything was quiet. Then, suddenly, the shooting broke out again. This time it was to the north, and fully two miles away.

"Hell!" exclaimed the ranchman. "That isn't a fight, it's a decoy! There's no telling which way the sheep went."

"Well, we can find 'em as soon as it's light," Cass said. "I never saw a man who could hide three thousand head of sheep." He spat, and looked at Valentine. "What are we going to do now?"

That was the wrong question, considering the state of Valentine's nerves. He whirled on the foreman. "I'll tell you what we aren't going to do, Henry! We aren't going to listen to you any more! You said wait till morning, till Harney got here. You said we didn't need to post a guard. And you talked me out of shooting up the sheep camp!"

"But you told me you didn't want to scatter the sheep, Ed."

"Look! Look down yonder!" Valentine almost screamed. He pointed down the wide valley. "They've set fire to my grass!"

He wheeled his horse and headed at a gallop for the ominous brightness in the mesquites. Henry Cass yelled for the cowboys to follow him to the windmill where they could get saddle blankets and empty sacks, and wet them in the horse trough.

Valentine, riding alone, found the flames running in a ragged yellow tongue up a brushy gully and spilling out on the eastern rim along a front that was already a hundred yards wide. If the wind held, the whole valley would burn.

This grass was the margin between him and bankruptcy. If he lost it, he would have to buy more feed for his cattle. He already had

[Turn page]

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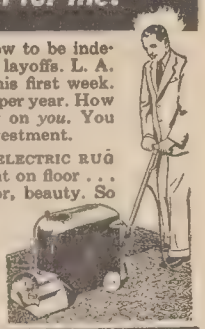

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sent both his wagons to Rosario for cottonseed cake. He would have to go deeper into debt at Harney's General Merchandise, borrow more money from Harney's First National, tighten the loop on his neck.

Valentine's jumper began to smoulder and burn; he ran out of the smoke and sucked in great gulps of fresh air. Now he could see the full extent of the fire—two hundred yards, and still spreading—and he cursed, and attacked it with his hat. It was like trying to hold back the tide with a bucket.

Somebody shouted his name above the roaring. He looked over his shoulder and saw the heat-distorted figure of Henry Cass, running to him with a wet saddle blanket. Cass thrust this into his grasp, and the coolness was like a caress to his blistered hands.

"I'll split the boys!" Cass yelled, "and fight from both wings. If we just had more water. It's a hell of a time to be without wagons!"

The fire roared down into another gully. Ed Valentines foot turned on a rolling stone and he fell, slipping to the bottom with live flame licking at his clothes. Henry Cass grabbed him by the belt and heaved him upright, then dragged him at a stumbling run into fresher air.

Then they heard wagon wheels. The wagon came up across the smoking black strip, through the dun haze, wheels and hoofs stirring a shower of charred wisps. Its tarp was gone, its bows shattered.

Pablo Ordonez yelled from the driver's seat, "Water, Senor Valentine, water! I have brought three barrels! Tell your men to come and wet their sacks!"

Valentine rubbed his burning eyes. Beyond the wagon were phantoms in the smoke—men leaping from their horses, coming on the run with dripping sacks, with shovels and an ax. Four, five, six men. It was Steve Murdock and the San Juan ranchers. Valentine stumbled to the wagon and supported himself against a wheel for a moment, shaking his head in perplexity. There were things he didn't understand.

THE sun was two hours high when they fought the fire to a walk on the slanted floor of the wide valley, then whipped it into a tight, brushy pocket on the southern rim of the Salado, and watched it burn itself out there. The spot was within a hundred yards of the place where the Flying V men had stood, earlier, to halt the advance of the sheep.

Pablo pulled burning wood from a dead mesquite, built a fire, and made coffee. It was strong and black; it took the sick, breathless emptiness out of a man's stomach. There were not enough tin cups to go around, but the men shared them, drinking together. They had fought shoulder to shoulder, vanquishing a common enemy.

Finally Ed Valentine got to his feet. "Murdock," he said in a raw-edged voice, "I'll say something I never thought I'd say. I'm much obliged for the help."

Steve rose and faced him. "This fire wasn't an accident. You see this wagon? You see the busted bows, the tarp gone? See how the paint's scorched here on the side? That's because the Two Sevens gang jumped it, turned it over, and set it on fire! They did that with a girl and an old man on the seat; and a wounded man lying in the back. That's Two Sevens for you—that's Jim Harney!"

Valentine's face worked. "I—I—how do I know that's true?"

"You can find out for yourself, if you don't want to take my word. It's high time you did your own thinking, and stopped jumping every time Jim Harney breathes—you and the rest of the cattlemen in the Bend."

Henry Cass breathed, "It sounds like the truth to me! Where were the Two Sevens boys during the fire? I didn't see any of 'em rushing up to help put it out."

Later, Steve Murdock and his men rode down the valley toward the Two Sevens boundary, and off the land Ed Valentine actually owned. The sheep had trailed some three miles south, not as far as Steve had expected. When they came nearer, topping a rise at the southern edge of the valley, they saw the flock scattered over an open area a quarter mile across. It was not moving. It was flecked with orange-colored dots. Manuel was running among the ewes like a man possessed.

Pablo yanked suddenly on the reins and stood up in the wagon. "It has started to happen! Look, Estevan, look! The lambs are coming."

The lambs were not dropping fast yet. There were ten when the wagon caught up with the flock; there were five more in the next hour. The new arrivals were orange colored, and those two hours old were turning a rusty brown. Manuel was an experienced lamber, Pablo said. He had had trouble only with one ewe. If he had not turned midwife and assisted the delivery, Pablo told Carla, the ewe would have died.

It was no time for false modesty. Carla was fascinated, realizing that the miracle of birth was going to be repeated a thousand, two thousand times. Pablo was not fascinated. He looked at thunderheads in the sky; he observed the land, rocky and brushy and dry. Where is the next water? Where can we find shelter?

Steve Murdock was not fascinated either. He came riding to the wagon now to talk to the expert. "Pablo, how fast will they drop?"

"*Quien sabe, senor?* Maybe one week, maybe two or three. We must make brush corrals. I do not like the looks of the sky."

"Not here, Pablo! I want to keep them moving, slowly; I want to get to Rafter F. Senor Valentine is a strange man. He will be our neighbor; I need him to help fight Harney, some day, when he comes around to that fight. I do not want to push him too far now."

"But on the move we will lose lambs, Estevan. Senor Valentine must understand that!"

Senor Valentine will not understand anything about sheep as long as they are on his grazing land, Steve thought. He shook his head. "We'll move as best we can."

There was no nooning period. The pace slowed to a hesitating crawl through the bright afternoon, while the clouds that had worried Pablo receded, and distant thunder growled over the hills. Twelve more lambs were born as they crossed the mesquite flat, six arrived on the rocky hillpoint, and Steve lost count in the farther valley. The flock was strung out for a mile as they came up to the windmill on Buckhorn Draw after sundown.

Pablo was busy cooking supper, and Diego sat propped against the trunk of a hackberry tree, his wounded leg thrust out before him. "Estevan," Pablo called in a sober voice,

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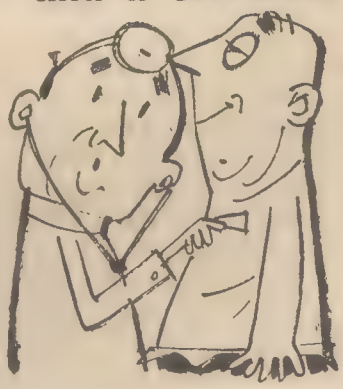

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"there has been trouble!"

He pointed to the wagon. The off-hind wheel was gone. Pablo had propped the axle with a forked mesquite branch. Steve limped up, his feet hurting, and swore.

"Where is it? Did the tire come off again?"

"Senor," Diego said, "I will tell you what happened. I was asleep in the wagon. Pablo had taken the mules yonder to the tank, to water them. I heard somebody working with the wheel, and I woke up. The next thing I knew, senor, the wagon fell down on that side, and I heard somebody rolling the wheel off through the brush. It must have been Senor Harney's *vaqueros* who stole the wheel."

Steve glanced at Pablo Ordonez. The old Mexican shrugged in a helpless gesture. "It is very bad luck, Estevan, but even Senor Valentine will understand that we cannot go anywhere on three wheels. No, I think we will have to stay at this place a little while."

LAMBS were dropping faster. If Pablo slept that night, it was some time after the early hours. He pressed Steve and Carla and the San Juan men into service, and worked them as they had never been worked before. The night was confusion and chaos; it was dust and weariness and pain, and the kindred phenomena of birth and death followed the lantern.

Steve understood, now, why Pablo was reluctant to keep driving the sheep while lambing was at its height. The old Mexican was teaching him another phase of sheep business, one that would recur each spring, as surely as the trees put out their leaves—as naturally, too, to Pablo Ordonez. But by midnight, when there were hundreds of thin, hungry quavering cries added to the babel of the flock, Steve thought of lambing as one of Nature's more violent demonstrations, like a flood or a tornado.

He staggered to the campfire, poured himself a cup of black coffee, and squatted wearily on a bedding roll. Carla came into the firelight, her black hair disheveled, and blood on her jeans. She looked exhausted, but her eyes were shining.

"The lambs are ugly little creatures at first, aren't they? But they're worth money, partner."

He grunted. He had never given much thought to the idea of making money on the sheep. Jim Harney opposed them; that was what made sheep worth while to Steve.

Carla studied him a monent, watching the play of firelight on his rugged, unshaven face, on the uncompromising line of his jaw. "Steve," she said softly, reading his mind, "it won't always be like this, will it? When we get to the Rafter F, there doesn't need to be any more trouble. The Bend is big enough for cattle and sheep; it's big enough for you and Jim Harney."

He halted the coffee cup halfway to his mouth. "You think so? It's not just me, it's not just the sheep. How about Ace Babb and the rest of the boys out there? How about what happened to them?"

"Does that have to be your fight?" she asked miserably.

"Mine, yes," he said, and looked at her strangely. "It doesn't have to be yours."

Carla was suddenly afraid with a woman's fear. Jim Harney would not let the trouble end. He would stop at nothing.

Sunrise brought no let-up. Instead, as the ewes left the bed ground and began to move around, browsing, the number of births increased. Steve had been on his feet or in the saddle for more than forty-eight hours, and after breakfast Pablo took his arm and led him firmly to his bedding roll. Steve sank back on the tarp. Pablo put his hat over his eyes to shade them from the sun, and he slept.

When he woke the sun was overhead, and the first thing he saw was Ed Valentine and Henry Cass sitting their horses in the camp. Consternation, amazement and anger mingled on their faces. Everywhere they looked were lambs. The hoofed locusts Valentine had feared were increasing by the minute.

Pablo Ordonez, standing before them with his sombrero held respectfully in both hands, was talking in his polite, musical voice. "But as you see, senor—the wagon! Until we can find a new wheel, we cannot move the sheep again. Until the lambs stop being born so fast, how can anybody go to Roasrio for the new wheel? This is too bad, Senor Valentine, it is a calamity! But what can we do?"

As if the information had just registered,

Valentine burst out, "You say the Two Sevens crowd stole that wagon wheel?"

Pablo shrugged. "I did not say that, senor. But *somebody* stole the wheel."

Cass said, "What is Harney trying to do to us? First the fire, and now this!"

Valentine drew a deep breath, his face working, his anger finding a new target. He said, "I don't know, but I'm sure going to find out!" Turning his horse, he saw Steve getting up from the bedding roll. For a few seconds he hesitated. Then he said, "Murdock, as soon as my wagons get back with that load of feed, I'll *lend* you a hind wheel."

Steve grinned. "Much obliged, Ed. That's right neighborly."

Thunderheads came up again that afternoon, and Steve wondered, but the dark clouds loosed only wind and a few ragged flashes of lightning before they receded. The sky was almost clear at dusk when Steve walked out around the flock to make sure no ewe had abandoned a newborn lamb in the brush. As he came back by the tank that had been built by throwing an earthen dam across Buckhorn Draw, he met Pablo. The old Mexican was slyly guiding a dripping wagon wheel down the slant of the dam.

"Pablo!" Steve made his voice stern. "What have you, there?"

"Me, senor? Nothing. It is only that I have found the stolen wheel. It was in the tank."

"It is very fortunate that you should find it, Pablito. And very strange."

The old Mexican's teeth gleamed in the shadows, and he chuckled as if pleased with himself. But he only said, "Now we must have the wheel near to the wagon. With the rain coming, we could not stay here in this draw. We must be ready to go to the higher grounds."

ACE BABB swore that the rust-colored, blatting lambs were falling from the sky, they arrived in such numbers during the next few days when the lambing reached and passed its peak. But no rain fell.

"How many lambs to go?" Steve asked Pablo finally.

[Turn page]

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"It is almost over, Estevan. I will make the tally today."

He counted as well as he could. There were more than twenty-five hundred lambs, and perhaps two hundred ewes were still pregnant.

"I think, Estevan, the lamb crop will be more than ninety percent. We have done well."

Steve's head whirled. Carla was jubilant, and the San Juan ranchers scratched numbers in the dirt and made plans. If a man could dig up five hundred dollars while sheep were still selling for a dollar a head; if a man had a little grass, and a small bunch of registered rams. . . .

The new lambs trailed slowly as the flock started on the move again. The ewes yet to be delivered fell behind, had their lambs in the brush, and tried to abandon them in their eagerness to keep up with the flock. The outfit made only three miles from dawn to dusk. It could have gone farther, but Pablo chose the campsite in the middle of the afternoon—a spot on high ground a half mile from another white brush draw.

That night the wind changed both direction and temperature. Now there was a fresh, cool, sweet smell, and yonder by the wagon old Pablo Ordonez was calling gleefully, "Get the slicker, Estevan. It is coming!"

Then a blinding brilliance of lightning sliced the sky, low and near at hand, limning the wagon and the picketed horses in sharp, remembered relief even after the flash was gone. The thunderclap exploded violently against the rimrock. An oversized drop of wetness splashed Steve's face, and then he heard the rain. It came charging furiously across the brow of the hill, running with the wind, running like a wild stampede.

Lantern light flickered and filled Carla's tent with a yellow glow, and a faint, intimate shadow moved on the canvas as she dressed. There was a sharp, rattling, stinging flurry of hail, another crash of thunder. Steve walked over to the tent, head back to feel the rain on his face, and the air was sweet with the smell of settled dust and the scent of rain on greasewood and sage and cedars.

"Carla," he called, "Do you know what this means? If it keeps up, the dry spell's busted. It means grass, feed—green grass, and weeds up to your knees by June! It'll put fat on every cow in the Bend."

Perhaps he would never stop being a cattleman. His first thought was of cattle, now, until the girl opened the fly of the tent and he saw the soft oval of her face framed in the dimness.

"It's wonderful, Steve," she said. And then, "Will the new lambs be all right?"

Pablo looked at the sky, at the lightning that hammered over the rimrocks. The wind was out of the southeast; it had brought this moisture all the way from the Gulf. "It is a warm rain, senorita," he said. "The lambs will be all right."

EVERYWHERE in the wide reaches of the Bend, men woke from their beds. Ed Valentine was half drunk with emotion, with thankfulness, with the knowledge that it was going to be a good year. If there were two, three good years in a row, the cattlemen would be rich again. I can tell Jim Harney to go to hell, he thought. With a couple of good years I can pay off the loan, and tell Jim Harney to go plumb to hell!

Big Lewis had gone back to Rosario the day before, needing new instructions. Harney had too many irons in the fire; he was jumping between Two Sevens and the cattle deal in Sanderson, between his banking and mercantile interests in Rosario and the new ranch across the Rio Grande. Harney was a hard man to catch, lately, but only he could decide how to handle Valentine.

Maybe the Flying V owner hadn't exactly gone over to Murdock's side, but he had ridden over to accuse the Two Sevens fence crew of setting his grass afire, stealing the wheel off the sheep wagon, and cutting the fence so that Flying V stock had strayed; and his temper was such that matters had come dangerously near to shooting.

Now the rain woke Big, unhappy and alone, in the house he had built for Katie on Silk Stocking Avenue. There was a roaring in his head to match that on the roof. He sat up groaning. He pressed his hands to his throbbing temples for a moment, then reached an unsteady hand for the bottle beside the bed.

Katie's bedroom door was locked. It had been locked ever since that day when Arch Kennedy rode out of town to arrest the sheep-

herder—ever since redheaded Katie lost her temper and told Big he would have to choose between working for Jim Harney and being married to her.

The whiskey cut the bad taste out of Big's mouth, and burned in his stomach. He lighted the kerosene lamp and sat thinking slow, dull thoughts, watching the door across the hall, hoping that Katie would get up out of bed to make sure the living room windows were closed.

If he stayed with Jim Harney, he could have his start in politics. The sheriff's job was a certainty; Harney had decided that Kennedy must go, and Harney controlled the cattlemen's votes. Or he did, Big thought. If this rain keeps up, some of them could get to feeling mighty independent.

He had another drink and lay down, sweating, worrying, trying in vain to go back to sleep. Katie used to be sweet on Steve Murdock, he thought. Maybe she still loves him. Maybe if I split with Harney, I still run the chance of losing her.

By daylight, the first savage, wind-blown flurries were spent, and the rain steadied, settling into a slow, relentless drizzle that soaked deep into the thirsty earth and found the grass roots. It rained all day. The San Juan ranchers grew restless, and Steve knew what they were thinking. He called Ace Babb aside.

"I'm much obliged for all you boys have done. You know that. But it looks like maybe we'll get on to the Rafter F with no trouble as soon as the draws go down. Why don't you ride over to the San Juan and take a look? You might have water enough on your places to last for quite a spell."

"There are no cows to drink it," Ace said. Then his face lit up. "But maybe when the feed comes up good we might promote some of those dollar sheep."

They saddled and turned up their slicker collars, and rode away. It kept raining. Pablo Ordonez rigged a wagon tarp over the chuck box and the campfire, where wet wood sizzled and smoked.

He was worried. In Texas, he had said, the weather is like a woman. Nobody can say what it will do next.

(To be concluded in the next issue)

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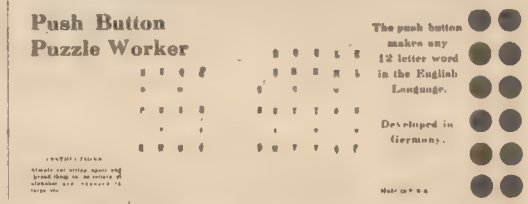

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by Professor MARCUS MARI

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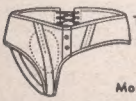

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